

AUGUST 1997

# interZone

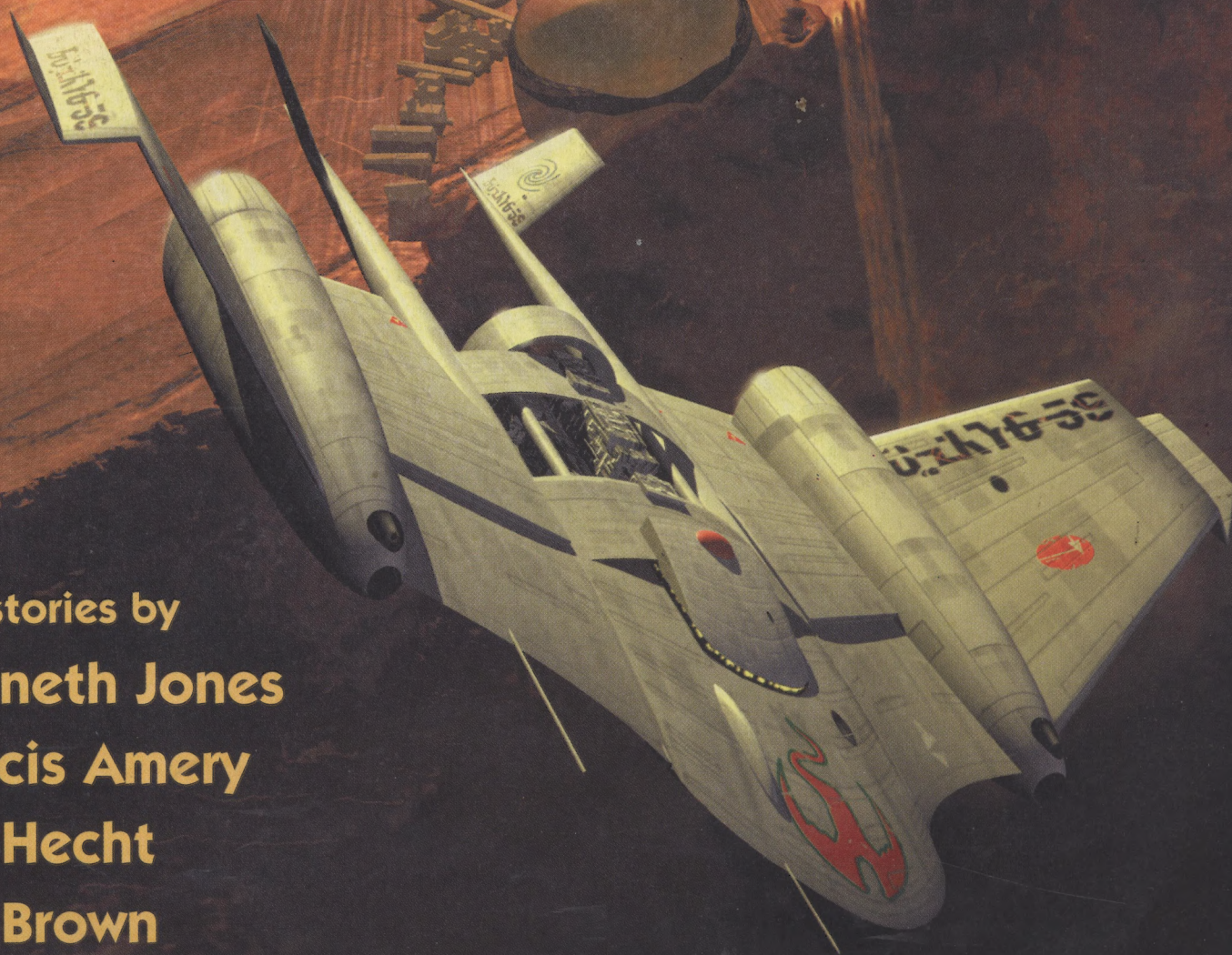
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122



## "Teddy Bears' Picnic"

Kim Newman & Eugene Byrne



plus stories by  
**Gwyneth Jones**  
**Francis Amery**  
**Jeff Hecht**  
**Eric Brown**



# GLASS

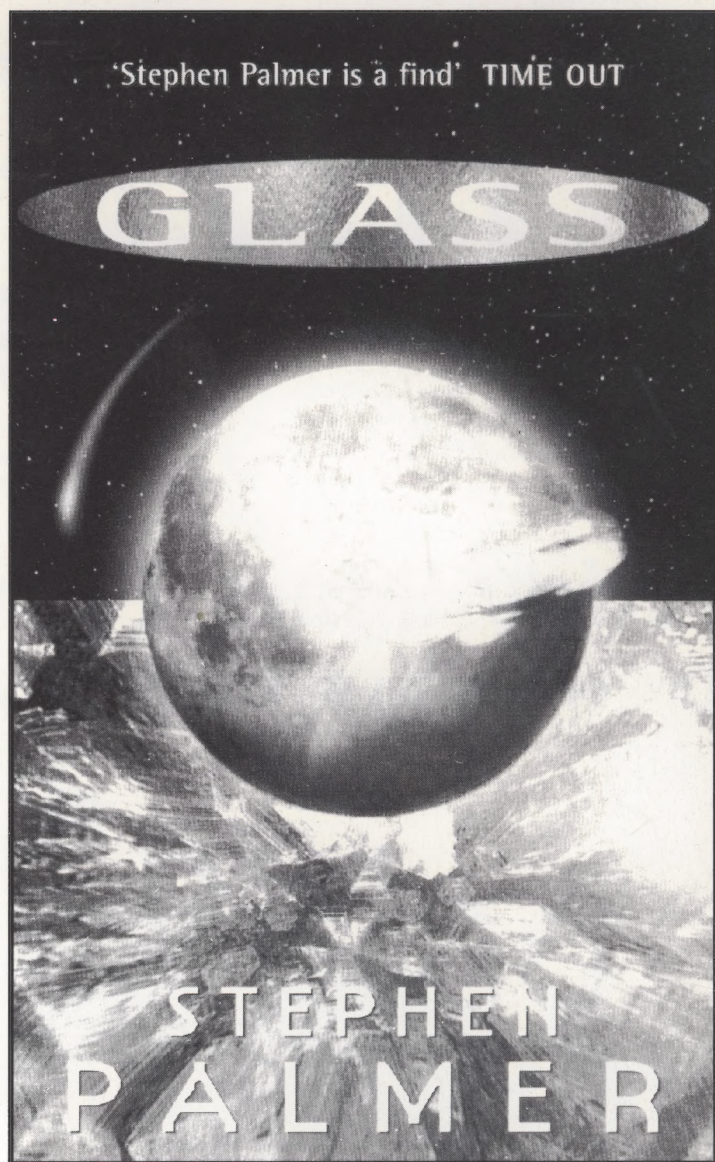
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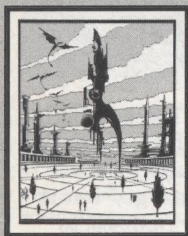
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*Interzone*

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# interZone

August 1997

122

science fiction & fantasy

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## + Interaction +

Dear Editors:

Many thanks for the latest *Interzone*. I'm afraid that much of your fiction these days is not to my taste. I think the fault lies in me rather than the quality of your stories; my tastes these days run more towards character-led science fiction where people react to sociological changes, and possibly this is difficult to achieve in a short space. Also, although I know that biotechnology is the present cutting-edge science, my personal knowledge in this area is limited. Maybe I'm getting left behind. The perils of ageing.

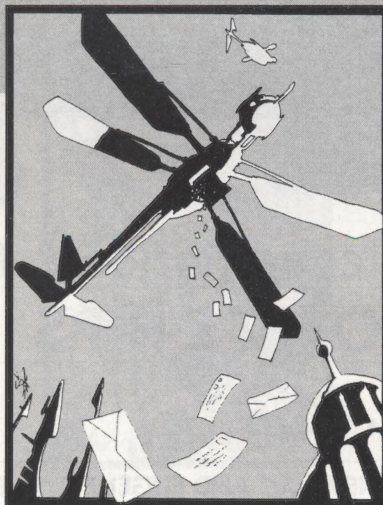
However, I shall keep subscribing, partly for the occasional gem, but also for your non-fiction. The book reviews are always useful (if only to show what to avoid) but I always enjoy the longer features on past sf masters. I especially enjoyed recent articles on Ballard and Blish, and the Neil Gaiman interview, but in issue 119 I'm afraid Elizabeth Counihan completely missed the target with the Gene Wolfe interview.

Wolfe is one of, if not *the* best writers working in sf and fantasy today, but he is notoriously a wily old bird when it comes to giving away information about his work. I think he completely out-smarted Elizabeth Counihan. The feature worked on the level of being an introduction for anyone who has never heard of Wolfe, but by the end, I was crying out for some specific information about his books.

The most important feature of Gene Wolfe's work is that so many of his novels, and especially his short fiction, take the form of puzzles to be solved by the reader. Many have very specific meanings hidden in the text, and for this reason I have read *The Book of the New Sun* more times than any other books that I own, finding fresh meanings and solutions each time. The down side of this is that reading Wolfe's work can be like doing a crossword puzzle which never has the solution published.

I think that Wolfe should follow up publication of each piece of work five years later with a set of text notes explaining the real meaning. That was meant tongue-in-cheek, but I would love to know if Wolfe ever did respond to John Clute's ingenious suggestion that Severian's mother was in fact the Autarch before a sex change or neutering operation. I would love to see a long interview with Wolfe done by John Clute, where he could really put him on the rack with probing specific questions.

And, yes, I did know that Americans go out for breakfast a lot, and



I'm sure Gene Wolfe has a nice house and likes Benny Hill. "Did you know we're Catholics?" indeed. Nice snow job, Gene.

**Allan Lloyd**

*Eardisley, Hereford*

Dear Editors:

*Interzone* 119 continues a recent renaissance of the magazine: good issue after good issue, good story after good story within each issue. Not that there haven't always been good stories and good issues, but we seem to be going through a particularly fertile patch.

However, issue 119 has a fly in its ointment. Gwyneth Jones, reviewing Jack Deighton's *A Son of the Rock*, says she is really sorry to be so cutting about a first-time novel from new British writer; I can't help but wonder, then, why she bothered to review it. Still, she did, and now I feel I must defend it.

First I must declare my interest: I come from the same town as Jack Deighton: I too am a "Son of the Rock." This may make me more than usually sympathetic towards him, but it doesn't completely cloud my critical faculties.

The novel has weaknesses: it's a rare first novel – a rare novel – that has none. I agree to some extent with Gwyneth's comments on the technology, and the pace is perhaps a little slow to get going. But the reader's patience is rewarded. The main character, Alan, starts out as "irritating" and "self-satisfied," as Gwyneth says; but he comes through his experiences, and develops by them, to the end where he faces the long twilight of his years with considerable dignity and strength. And in doing so he points a finger at the ephemera- and youth-worship of his – and of course, our – society.

Alan's development is the strongest element of the book, to my

## + Interaction +

mind. "I felt guilty but I wasn't bothered enough to do anything about it" may not, as Gwyneth says, "constitute a howl of moral outrage," but it does sound terrifyingly realistic to me. Isn't that how we often react when we see the person with the collecting can in the station; or the *Big Issue*-seller outside the supermarket? Isn't it how our whole society reacts when we see the horrors of Rwanda, or the latest human-rights abuse from the Indonesian government?

Alan reacts to Sonny's predicament as any of us might: he is too weak to stand up to his employers to try to prevent the destruction of Sonny's home. In this he is being, among other things, a realist: he knows that he wouldn't be able to stop the mining company anyway. And yes, it takes the destruction of his own backyard to make him respond as he should have; but he absorbs his experience and grows. Just like a real person.

Perhaps worst of all, Gwyneth refers to the "few frigid lesbian bitches who turn him down." In fact Alan is turned down by one woman who is a lesbian, and who he treats with respect and admiration; he certainly doesn't think she's "frigid."

It's not a perfect novel; but I think it deserves a better chance than you gave it, Gwyneth. It would be a shame if Jack Deighton were to be so discouraged by this savage review that he didn't try again. I think he will have great things in him.

**Martin McCallion**

*[martin.mccallion@ukonline.co.uk](mailto:martin.mccallion@ukonline.co.uk)*

Dear Editors:

Reading Neil Jones's piece on "Trekoffery" (*Interzone* 120) I was slightly shocked at a comment made about the novelization of *Star Trek: First Contact*, namely that as the film will shortly be out on video why read the book? (I paraphrase slightly.) Such a comment seems to me out of place in a magazine that generally encourages reading. Some people, believe it or not, actually enjoy reading, even if it happens to be blatant commercial exploitation of a popular film.

It might be noteworthy that much of this sort of spinoffery does well in the shops so presumably many people feel them to be worthwhile, although they are of course helped by what one of your readers entitled the "Pratchetting" of bookshelves (although I am not sure that Terry Pratchett really deserves the accusation just because he happens to be prolific and popular).



I freely admit that I enjoy the occasional spinoff (should we call *Star Wars* spinoffs "Lucasoffery"?). This may be because I have grown up with them and maybe because they can be very entertaining even if not often very challenging. As has been said, it is lamentable that distributors tend to favour film and TV spinoffery so much and that shops do tend to "Force" or to "Trek" shelves (preferable, I think, to the term "Pratchetting"), to the neglect of more serious novels, sf or otherwise, but spinoffery will always have its place in the profit-seeking book market and I'm sure that many *Trek* fans will find plenty of reasons to buy *First Contact* despite the advent of the video.

**Malcolm Rowe**

lfruwe@reading.ac.uk

Dear Editors:

Here are some of my grumbles.

1. Why is it that science fiction is a relative unknown in the field of fiction? When I first decided to try sf I entered the reading market with one of these preconceptions that have plagued sf for years, in that I thought sf fans were anorak-wearing geeks who had no social life and could speak the Klingon language (yes, there is such a thing: this writer has seen it on the Internet). So I went along to my local bookshop and found that the sf shelf was groaning with those sword-and-sorcery books. I asked the bookstore assistant if she could recommend any decent sf and she just stared at me as if I had spoken to her in Klingon. Similar efforts to find help at the town library had me frustrated. Finally I went to W. H. Smith, and thankfully I found a guide to science fiction and a copy of *SF 4*, a collection of short stories edited by Gardner Dozois. The collection opened me up to some of the best literature I had read that year, and the guide helped explain to me some of the sf sub-genres such as slipstream, cyberpunk and alternative history – and it also recommended sf books and magazines. So then I tried looking for the magazines that the guide recommended and again my efforts were snubbed. What the hell is going on? If I hadn't been so determined to read science fiction then I probably would have given up. It saddens me to think that other people in my position who would have been avid sf fans like myself were turned away because of the limited market. I think it is high time that those people who are moaning that sf is in decline, as Gardner Dozois did in *SF 4*, should get off their backsides and start promoting sf to a wider audience instead of letting them think sf is all about *The X-Files* and *Babylon 5*.

2. I agree wholeheartedly with David Burrows's letter in the May *Interzone* – he was upset at the treat-

ment of Philip Pullman's book *Northern Lights* by retailers and the public. Pullman has created an evocative and vividly drawn alternative universe, with beautiful and elegant prose. This is the first volume of his "Dark Materials" trilogy and it has won two children's book awards. The second volume promises to be set entirely in our universe and could gain a few adult awards. We use the term "classic" so much that it has lost its meaning nowadays. However, I am confident in saying that this trilogy will eventually attain that fabled status, "a *Klasik* of Litreachar." So don't be embarrassed by rooting through the Young Adults section of a library looking for it.

3. I think the time is right for the *Star Trek* series on television to be axed before its welcome is outworn. I admit to being a keen *Trek* fan (although not going as far as learning the Klingon language), but ever since the demise of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* the series has fallen both in ratings and in quality. The latest offering, after the abysmal *Deep Space Nine*, has been *Star Trek: Voyager*, which has produced some of the most pitiful scripts ever aired on television (a particular episode comes to mind in which the *Voyager* was out of coffee and the Captain was upset; could you ever imagine Kirk or Picard worrying about coffee?). Gene Roddenberry would be devastated if he could see the depths to which his brilliant idea has plummeted. However, the one glimmer of hope is the film series, which looks like it may have another batch of adventures in the offing for Picard and his crew after *Generations* and *First Contact*. I know that my comments will be considered as traitorous by many Trekkies, but I also know there are some of you out there who share my opinions on this issue.

**Faisal Ahmad**

Huddersfield, W. Yorkshire

**Editor:** In reply to your first point, what more do you expect people like Gardner Dozois to do to promote science fiction? In Dozois's case, he edits the best American sf magazine, *Asimov's*, and also produces the annual year's-best volume you refer to; additionally, he edits or co-edits many other paperback sf anthologies for Ace Books (see our "Books Received" in this issue for an example). Collectively, his editorial efforts must have reached many thousands of new readers over the years. But to make sf more of a respected genre in the world at large I suppose what we need are more reputable "outsiders" who have a liking for sf to stand up and praise it in public – more Doris Lessings and Fay Weldon, who have done this sort of thing on occasions. Or, at any rate, their younger equivalents. But it's an uphill struggle at present,

when almost every "teenage" newspaper scribbler and half-baked sub-editor seems unable to see past the anorak joke.

Dear Editors:

As a subscriber since *IZ* 92, I have finally summoned the "bottle" to ask a couple of questions. However, to avoid embarrassing myself, first let me state my sf credentials – Asimov, Bova, Clarke, Delany, Ian M. Banks and Patrick Tilley are "my thing." Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* and its sequels, and Dan Simmons's *Hyperrion* and its sequels, are among my top-10 reads. Now, having got that out of the way, from *IZ* 92 to *IZ* 119, two questions about the magazine have remained foremost in my mind:

1) "Ansible Link" – I suspect it's humorous. If, however, I manage to understand 50% per issue, then I think I'm doing well. At the risk of appearing foolish, am I the only reader who doesn't know/has never heard of/is totally clueless about most of what is written by David Langford?

2) "Mutant Popcorn" – does Nick Lowe assume... (a) The reader hasn't seen the film, so this is a review for the reader's benefit; (b) The reader has already seen the film, so this is a retrospective examination/dissection; (c) The reader simply wants to be entertained by Lowe's incisive wit?

Those are my two questions, but while I'm at the keyboard can I take the opportunity to add my tuppence-worth to the *ST: TNG* & *ST: DS9* v. *B-5* debate. I believe *B-5* has the clear edge over the children of *ST*, not because of its story-arc, but because it has interesting/intriguing baddies and we (the humans) aren't all wonderful people (note *ST: Voyager* doesn't even warrant a mention).

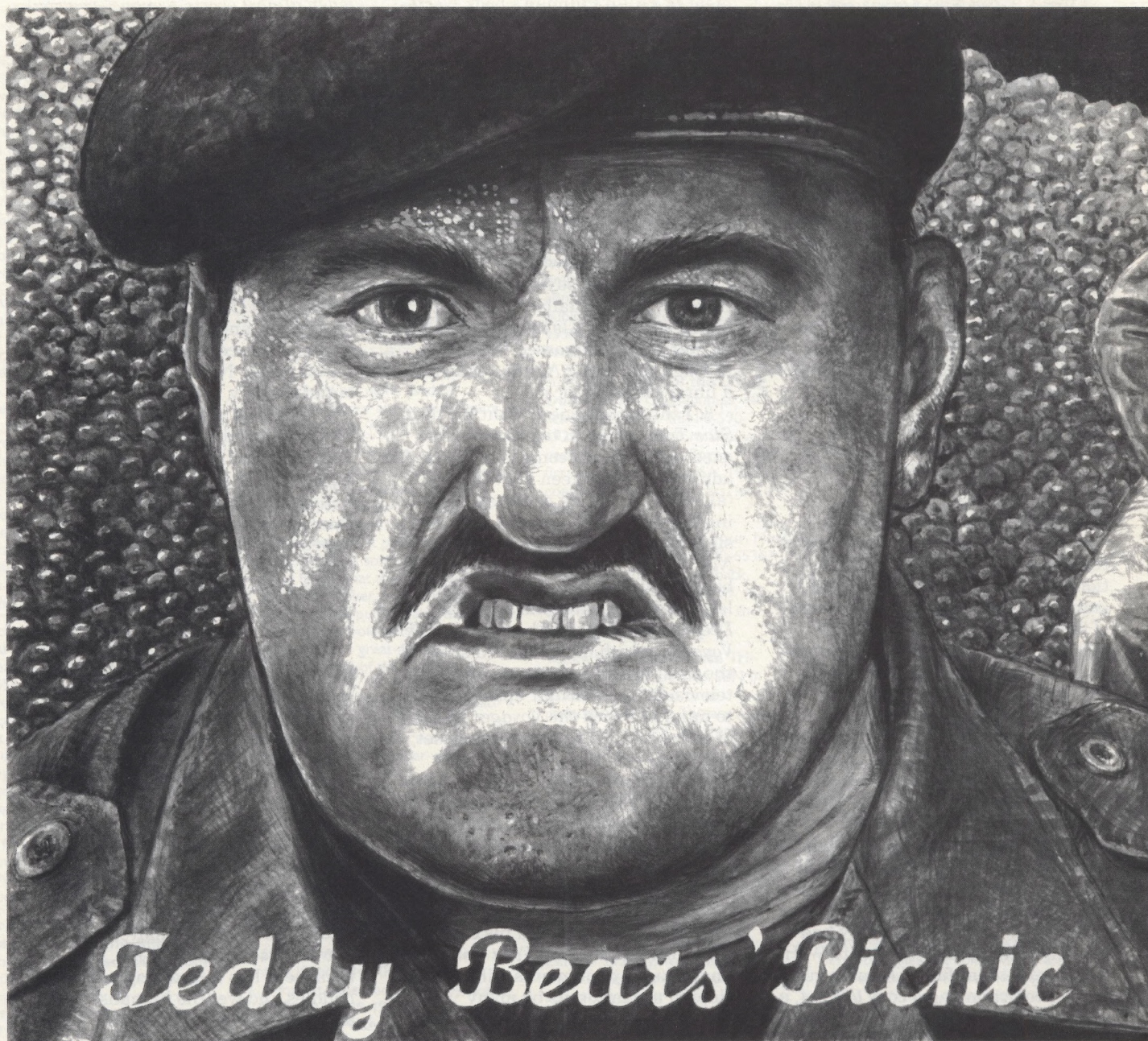
Finally, I like *Interzone*. I like the stories, interviews and book reviews. I'm not complaining, just seeking enlightenment.

**Robert Lettman**

London

**Editor:** Langford's "Ansible Link" is the most consistently popular non-fiction item we publish (or at any rate so we are told by those who vote in each year's readers' poll). Like all gossip columns it may take some getting into, however. My advice is just to relax and enjoy those bits that you can; with luck, more and more of it will become clear to you in time. As for Nick Lowe's film reviews, far be it from me to guess what Nick's private assumptions are; but as editor – and being conscious of the fact that our reviews often appear too late to be "news" (I recommend you go to the film mags for that) – my own opinion is that your guesses (b) and (c) are the valid ones.





# *Teddy Bears' Picnic*

## PART ONE

**B**ob splashed tap-water into his eyes, and tried to blink away the throbbing in his head. He wasn't supposed to be hung over till tomorrow, but everyone and his uncle was buying him drinks. In the Ladies' Lounge, he'd gone easy, knocking back only the sweet sherry his Mam and Thelma drank. He wished now he'd stuck to the Back Bar and brown ale.

Then again, Terry had just put a couple of gallons through his kidneys, on top of a fish-and-chip buttie tea, and he was in a worse state than Bob. Terry was in one of the stalls, hands jellyfish on the floor, chinning the porcelain rim as he spewed.

Bob went over and hooked his hands into Terry's armpits, lifting him up and aiming his mouth at the toilet bowl. He felt the racking of reverse peristalsis – a term remembered from school – run through Terry's ribs. The last of the chips and Mother's Pride came up as beery sludge.

"She let you tup her last night," Terry said. "Tight-

drawers Thelma."

That was true.

"She thought you were going to die in foreign parts, so she dropped 'em for you."

That was arguable.

Yet more came up out of the bottom of Terry's stomach. It must be the last of it.

"She'll never understand, that one."

Bob hauled Terry upright and wiped his face with a rough paper towel, getting off the worst of the sick.

"You smell like a tramp's dustbin."

Terry touched a fist to his chest and lightly thumped Bob over the heart.

"She'll never get in here, Bob. Not bloody Thelma."

"I should hope not. It's the Gents."

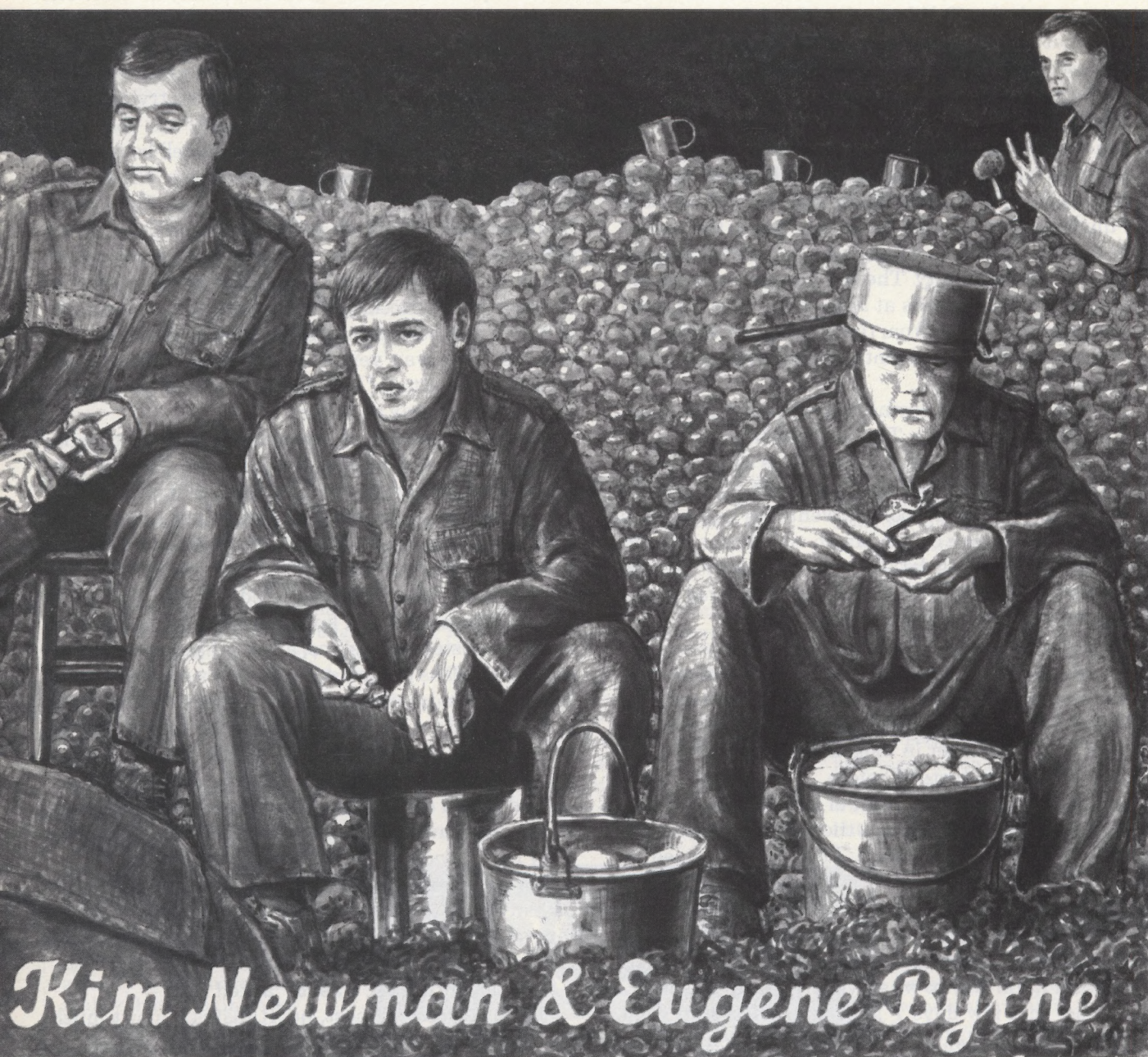
"Ahh get on with you, you know what I mean."

Bob did.

"Come on, Bob. Back to the battlefield ... King, country and Strongarm Ruby Red Bitter are calling."

Terry lurched out of the toilets. Bob followed, as he had been following his mate since St Godric's primary school.





Illustrations by Gerry Grace

Thelma had been furious when he volunteered. She'd screamed at him that he didn't have to go in the Army – he could have had a medical exemption from National Service for his flat feet – and that now he'd passed his City & Guilds he should make a career for himself, but oh no, he had to sign up just because his best pal Terry had...

The smell of piss was worse in the corridor outside the Gents. There was a sound, as if someone had left a tap running. Bob ran into Terry's back. By the stairs stood a fat bloke in a dark suit. It took a moment to realize he was piddling against the wall.

"I don't much like flock wallpaper either," said Terry, "but this is taking it a bit far."

The man turned and zipped the fly on immense trousers.

"It's me own fookin' club, y'daft get," he snorted in broad Mancunian. "I can take a burst where I fookin' like."

Bob recognized the fat man. The Comedian was chairman and secretary of the club. He was in with Jack Carter, and in this part of town, Jack Carter ran everything.

The Comedian looked at them. "I know you lads. It's

your party tonight, in't it? Do or die, king and country?" Somehow, Bob didn't want to admit it. But Terry took an unsteady bow.

"Daft bastards," the Comedian said, not without admiration. He pulled out a wad of notes. With pees-smelling fingers, he peeled off four blue fivers and shoved them into Bob's hankie pocket.

"Buy yourself some slant-eyed scrubber in Saigon, lads."

Terry tried to thank him but spasmed again, bending double to drool thin bile on the already-stained carpet. Bob held him up.

"That's a fookin' pretty picture."

The Comedian's enormous mouth opened in a bark of laughter that shook all his mounds of fat. Terry coughed again, hawking stomach lining.

"Fare thee well, lads," said the Comedian. "And when you get to the Bloody 'Chine, kill some fookin' treens for the Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club. Bring us back a necklace of ears we can hang on the darts trophy."

He put his hand round the full glass and left it there. He told Bet Lynch to have one herself.



"Don't mind if I do, Bob," said the barmaid, looking him up and down. He'd lost a lot of weight. "A vodka- tonic. That'll be four and ninepence please."

1965 seemed a long time ago. Prices had doubled in two years. Everything in Indo or the NAAFI was dirt cheap. It was as well he had a wedge of back-pay from the months when he couldn't spend it.

Bet gave him change, peering at him from under vast false eyelashes like hideous jungle insects. He could hear her thinking "poor love, the things you've been through..."

At quarter to two on a wet Sunday in February, the Club was almost empty. The few customers were old lads, men with no missus at home to do them Sunday dinner. They looked up from the *News of the World* and eyed him. Word of his adventures had obviously come home ahead of him.

He'd sent a telegram saying he'd be back Monday, but had made it a day earlier. The taxi had dropped him off at the house an hour ago, but there was no one in and he didn't have a key. Mam and Dad must have gone to Auntie Glad's in Hartlepool. He went over to Thelma's and found she'd gone on the bus to visit a schoolfriend in Thornley. Walking by Terry's parents' house, he noticed a boarded-over window. There was a red paint-splash like blood on the front door.

He looked at the beer. Foam ran down the sides of the glass. He strained to hear the fizz. Hundreds of tiny bubbles burst. A pint of Whitbread Trophy Bitter! The pint that thinks it's a quart! He'd liked the IPA in the NAAFI and Tiger Beer in Saigon, but Trophy was the taste of home, the taste of before.

Maybe because he was a sort of hero or someone further up the chain of contempt thought he was cute, or maybe it was just procedure, but they'd decided to Blighty him fast. After a few days' checkup at a base hospital at Cam Ranh Bay, he was on the gozome bird.

The RAF had a few ancient, hideously noisy, Sunderland flying boats to shuttle quacks and Blighty Ones from Cam Ranh Bay to whatever troopship was nearest home. In a few days *T for Tommy* flew him from Indo to Rangoon, Calcutta, Karachi and Aden. He was dropped off at Port Said to join the *SS Uganda*. Nobody from his unit was on board, but some of the blokes had heard about him. Before they passed Malta he'd been awarded honorary extra stripes and invited to join the Sergeants' messdeck.

The door opened with a blast of damp air, chilling him to the bone. An old man with a toothbrush moustache, flat cap and stained overcoat ambled in, shouting to Bet that he'd have "just the usual 'alf." Further down, a man and a woman had an animated argument about whether someone's car was blue or green.

On the boat, a Welsh Sergeant-Major called Williams took a sort of shine to him. Old as the hills, he'd even been out in Burma during the Real War. Now, he was coming home from his third tour in Indo.

"You get 'ome, it's a lot smaller than it used to be," he'd said. "Not just the size of the 'ouses. Things people are worried about are smaller, too. You'll be dying for a pint of the local brew. I bet you've been dreaming about this foaming glass of Newcastle Brown or whatever muck it is you drink up there. For two years you've imagined that dirty great 'andful of beer you'll down in one the minute you get off the train. Queer stuff, beer. Wherever you go,

the first pint's no bloody good. Especially at 'ome. The last pint you 'ave is always the best one."

The top of the pint had almost gone flat. Only a thin line of white foam ringed the brown liquid's surface.

He patted the pockets of his battledress trying to find a cigarette. One thing about the Army was they gave you plenty of pockets. Not like the tight bell-bottoms the younger blokes were wearing these days. The fashion came from Russia, like most daft things. He found a battered pack of Guards in the Penguin Pocket on his trousers. He took it out, along with the paperback Williams had given him, *The Edge of the Sword* by Anthony Farrar-Hockley. The author had been captured in Korea and been tortured. Farrar-Hockley had guts, but his book was very stiff-upper-lip, officerly and British and matter of fact. If Bob wrote up his story, he wouldn't be nearly so polite.

They had docked at Avonmouth late last night. Troopships never landed at Southampton, Pompey, London or even Liverpool any more because it was "bad for morale." Indo hands returned furtively to a dock miles from anywhere, preferably in the middle of the night. It was not a heroes' welcome: no Lord Mayors, no military bands. They were greeted by glaring yellow sodium lamps, cranes, a knot of dock-workers huddling in grimy, glistening oilskins, a few MPs glowering from under the peaks of their red caps and a couple of dozen Queen Alexandra nurses in khaki cloaks... No anthems or hymns were sung, there was only the hiss of the rain on concrete, the clanking of chains, the occasional shout. There were no cigars, only the smell of bunker-oil and damp clothes, and the diesel fumes from the Deltic loco hauling the hospital train waiting on the quay for *Uganda's* less fortunate passengers.

The tab burned his throat, reminding him he'd not had anything to drink since a mug of tea at the WRVS caravan on the docks. Sod it, he thought. He lifted the glass and necked the lot in one go.

"Worth waiting for, was it?" asked Bet.

"To be perfectly honest, no. It tastes of nowt much, doesn't have enough alcohol in, and is full of gas."

He theatrically placed the empty glass by the pump-handle in front of her.

"But it is nonetheless what we drink round here, and here is home. So I'll have another pint please, Bet, love."

Off the boat, Williams saw to it that Bob was marched through demob on the double. Everyone was frightened of Sergeant-Majors, especially officers. He'd sorted Bob's pay and made sure he didn't have to bother with the nonsense of giving up his uniform and kitbag and signing for every little bloody thing. He even wangled first-class express rail warrants.

They travelled together as far as Bristol Temple Meads, then Williams had to get off to change for Swansea. He was going to spend a few weeks with his sister, then he'd be back in the Army again.

"Listen to me, lovely boy," he'd said. "Going 'ome is hard work, but you got to stick it out, see."

The next pint was a little better.

"What are you going to do, Bob?" asked Bet.

"Reckon I'll hang around 'til you close, then find a caff that's open and read the Sunday papers 'til me Mam and Dad get back home."

She looked at him, knowing he was kidding her.



"I'll go back to accountancy I suppose," he admitted. "I can count with both sets of fingers and me toes, you know."

*Aye, so it's just as well you didn't get any of them shot off, isn't it? Sorry to butt in like this, man, but I had to introduce meself sooner or later. Me name's Survivor-Guilt. You and me, we're about to get to know one another right canny well, young Robert.*

"You are a card Bob," said Bet. "And after everything you've been through and all."

Obviously there were stories going around town: how he'd suffered, how heroic he'd been. Maybe he should write a book so everyone would know the truth. He was lucky. He'd come back in one piece. The firm had even taken the trouble to find his BFPO address and write him that his old job was waiting. He was all right. Better than most.

*Awright, Bob, whatever you say, marra.*

"And what about Terry, eh?" Bet said. "Who'd have thought he'd be that big a bastard? Pardon my French. If he come in here, the only pint he'd get'd be flung in his bloody rotten face."

"Do I look like a fanny?" yelled Sergeant Grimshaw, face up close against Terry's. "I repeat, do I look like a fanny?"

"No, sergeant," Terry said, wide-eyed.

"Then why are you trying to fuck me? You 'orrible Northern bollockbrain scum-filth snot-gobbling shit-faced granny-shagger."

Bob, backbone rigid, swivelled his eyes. Terry seemed to be blasted by the sergeant's breath.

"And what are you looking at, tart?"

Grimshaw loomed up against Bob, eyes huge.

"Are you his girlfriend? Are you two nancy-boys homos of the botty-banging jessie persuasion? I'll have no unauthorized buggery in my barracks."

There were 30 or so young men on the parade ground, still in civvies, suitcases beside them. They were almost all National Servicemen, barely willing to heed the call of their country. Someone sniggered.

A weight was lifted from Bob and Terry, as the sergeant wheeled off to shout at someone else.

"Let me make myself perfectly clear, *ladies*. These two poove puddings may be lower than the shreds of toe-cheese I scrape out of my socks, but you are all equally worthless in my eyes. You are all, I repeat *all*, less than nothing. You are merely the fanny-discharge of your miserable whores of mothers. After nine weeks, you may, and I underline *may*, be elevated from the mud to the position of Private Soldier in the service of His Majesty, the King. You, do you love His Majesty, the King?"

The sergeant addressed a London lad called Butler, whose permanent grin could not be wiped away. Bob and Terry had met him at the station, on route to Basic Training Depot No. 9, which was near Walmington-on-Sea, a small town on the south coast.

"Yes, sergeant, I love His Majesty the King."

"If His Majesty the King needed to wipe his bottom after a royal shit, would you rip the tongue out of your head and humbly offer it to him as toilet paper? If His Majesty the King needed a holder for his candle-stick would you bend double from the waist and open your arsehole? If His Majesty the King required you to gob

in your father's face, tit-fuck your mother and run a lawn mower over your virgin sister, would you reply 'at once Your Majesty, anything you say Your Majesty'?"

"Is that a rhetorical question, sergeant?"

The sergeant's hand latched onto Butler's crotch like a vice. Butler's eyes went red.

"Sing soprano, you spunk-eating splash of spew. Sing 'The Happy Wanderer'."

Butler screeched, tears pouring down his cheeks. Grimshaw literally squeezed the tune out of him, wringing his balls as if they were a musical instrument.

"I love to go a-wandering..." Butler yelped, stumbling through the song, "... with my knapsack on my back... fol-de-ree, fol-de-rah, fol-de-rah-hah-hah-hah-aaarrgh!"

Grimshaw gripped, white-knuckled, protracting the final note.

"Above us all is Lord God Almighty, who takes no interest in our affairs. Directly below God is His Majesty the King. Loyal to His Majesty the King are His Majesty's Armed Forces. His Majesty's Armed Forces have bestowed upon me absolute power of life and death over you, Butler. When I speak, it is not merely myself, Sergeant Grimshaw, speaking, but it is the voice of God, transmitted through His Majesty the King and down through every honoured echelon of His Majesty's Armed Services direct to your pustulant ear-holes. Can you hear me, Butler?"

The Londoner nodded through agony. Grimshaw eased his grip, then kissed him full on the lips.

"I love you, Butler. You are the best, the *only*, man in this whole squad. You are promoted to honorary Corporal for the duration of your basic. In my eyes, you are still the drippings from a syphilitic rat's knob-end. But, in comparison with them, you are a demi-god. You walk with giants, and you carry a Bren gun."

The sergeant stood back to survey the recruits, who stood like trees next to their suitcases and duffel bags. Bob realized the man had managed in five minutes to make a cohesive unit of young men who were mostly still strangers to each other. They were united in their utter hatred of Sergeant Grimshaw.

"In a moment, you will all get a cheap thrill," Grimshaw shouted. "Corporal Butler here will order you to strip naked. The last man out of his kit will be cleaning the bogs with his toothbrush for the next month. Then, you will be examined for hideous diseases and disgusting parasites, be given a proper haircut with scissors the size of sheep-shears, and be issued with uniforms, boots and other essential kit. You will be required to take care of these with your worthless lives. Remember, these are not presents. These are lent to you for the duration of your service. Each and every bootlace and jockstrap is the personal property of His Majesty the King. If an item is damaged or lost, the rules of war require me to inflict merciless and disproportionate punishment. Butler, give the order to disrobe, now."

"Men," Butler squeak-shouted, then dropping his voice an octave, "at the double, kit off!"

Bob unlaced his shoes first, and began neatly to get out of his civvies, folding and piling every garment as his Mam had taught him.

Some of the others were stark naked before he had his shirt and trousers off.

Buttons pattered on the asphalt. Terry was ripping



off his clothes as if invited in for late night coffee with Sabrina. It began softly to rain.

Grimshaw wove in and out of struggling lines. It was not easy to undress standing-up. Men hopped from foot to foot as they fought with socks and shoes.

Bob knew he would be last. He tried to hurry, but he could not break the habit of neatness. At last, he folded his underpants and put them on the pile. He supposed he would have to learn how to clean toilets.

Grimshaw walked past and looked down, first at his shrivelled genitals, then at his perfectly-folded square of clothes.

"Very neat, Nancy."

Bob was astonished and relieved. There were other men still trying to undress.

Finally, there was only Frank Spencer, the squeaky-voiced semi-imbecile who had been at the station with Butler. He had started undressing with his cap and worked down, and got his trousers stuck on his shoes.

Spencer fell over, sobbing silently.

"Butler, over here," Grimshaw shouted. "Piss in this man's eyes."

Bob saw Butler pause, realize how precarious his position was, and trot over to his friend. He pointed his knob, but couldn't get a flow going.

The rain was pissing down for him. Finally, he managed a pathetic dribble. He missed Spencer's face. Bob would have liked to think that was deliberate.

Spencer was crying out loud, scrabbling round like a crab, ripping his trousers apart at the seams in a last, desperate attempt to get them off.

"Rest of you, line up," Grimshaw shouted.

The rain was stinging cold, with a January wind pelt-ing it against bare skins. Bob felt needles of ice against his back and buttocks. Like everyone, he was shaking, dripping rain droplets with every shiver.

"Best bath you've 'ad in years, you dirty beggars."

They huddled in a line, hugging themselves. Their clothes were forgotten, soaked through by the rain.

"Nobody gets a towel or a uniform until Spencer has well and truly been pissed on. And I mean by every man here."

Dread closed on Bob's heart. He had never been able to use a public urinal. He would point and feel pressure in his bladder, but it just didn't happen. He always waited for a sit-down to be free and pissed in private.

And now he didn't even *need* to take a slash.

Grimshaw, this elemental force of malign nature, would skip to Bob as quixotically as he had from Terry to Butler to Spencer. When he failed to produce the thinnest squirt of piss, Bob would be on the ground where Spencer was. The sergeant would probably order the rest to shit on him.

This was a nightmare that would never end. Nothing could be worse than this.

And it was only his first day in the Army.

"Sod this for a game of soldiers," Terry said through chattering teeth.

William Casper, who claimed to be 18 but looked four years younger, was in line after Butler. He was the only other "volunteer" in the squad. He hardly had hair on his pubes. And he couldn't manage a piddle.

Bob thanked His Majesty the King and God. The wrath of Grim would not descend next on him.

"Pathetic, the lot of you."

The Sergeant picked up Spencer, who was now at last free of all clothes but his socks and shoes.

"You all right, lad?" he asked, tenderly, smiling. "Could do with a cuppa rosie lee, I'll bet."

Spencer cried out and nodded.

"You'd love to be inside, warm. Wrapped up. Jam bun. Bourbon biscuits. *Sing Something Simple* on the wireless."

Spencer looked wistful, cracked an idiotic longing smile, and sagged, almost leaning on the sergeant, a cat cuddling up to a loving owner.

"Well, you can forget that, Private Piss-Stain Spencer!" Grimshaw yelled, raping the moment to bleeding bits. "You've not earned a uniform yet. None of you human-shaped lumps of shit have. Fall in formation, and start running."

Naked and delirious, Bob collided with Terry as they tried to stand in an orderly group. Grimshaw took his swagger-stick to shins, then started whipping buttocks.

The Sergeant jogged, and Bob tried to run along after him. His feet bled on the rough asphalt, and his ankles jarred with every step. The rain was bucketing down on them.

After half an hour, Grimshaw called enough and directed them to the baths where, he delighted in telling them, they could get the filth off their feet with a nice cold shower.

Bob thought it was a wonder no one had died. He and Terry leaned against each other and limped, moaning, towards the bath-house.

Inside, immaculately uniformed, plumply pink and comfortable, was an officer. He took a look at the stumbling men, who must have seemed like survivors of some war atrocity, and his look of composure vanished. He pantomimed appalled sympathy and wheeled on Grimshaw, red-faced.

"It looks as though these men have been tortured," he shouted.

"That is correct, sah!"

All anger vanished and the officer smiled indulgently.

"Well done," he said. "Carry on, sergeant."

Grimshaw looked at the men and shouted "into the showers, girls. And be sure to scrub behind your ears."

Bob read it over again.

*Some will tell you the greatest hero the British Armed Forces have ever produced was Admiral Nelson, some will put up Monty, some General Gordon. But to any National Serviceman who went through Basic Training Depot No. 9, the only real hero is Private Arthur Seaton. They didn't give Seaton the Victoria Cross. In fact, they hanged him and buried him in an unmarked grave. If I knew where it was, I'd smother the plot in wreaths, and so would a hundred others. Seaton, you see, was the soldier who killed Sergeant Grimshaw. Grim would have been proud of him. One shot, straight to the head, just the way he liked it. Sometimes, when I wake up thinking I'm back in Walmington-on-Sea or Khe Sanh, I sob at the injustice. Seaton wasn't in our mob. He came along months after we'd shipped out. There's not a man who trained at Walmington who wouldn't swap tickets for the Cup Final for the chance to see Sergeant Grimshaw's brains shot out. It's a tragedy it wasn't captured on film. I hope they buried Grim at a crossroads*



with a bayonet through his heart and a tin of bully beef rammed up his arse.

He handed the page to Thelma. Frown-lines crinkled her forehead, and she was unable not to look as if she smelled something bad.

"What do you think?"

Thelma struggled to find words. "It's a bit... hard. Really nasty."

"I can't write a soft book, love. Not about the Army, not about the war."

"It's so bitter, Bob. This poor man Grimshaw was just trying to... well, to toughen you up, make men of you. You can't still hate him."

"Thelma, Frank Spencer had eleven thumbs. He was a walking disaster. He couldn't cross the road without causing an accident. He couldn't boil a kettle without burning the water. When he got through his basic, Grimshaw wrote up a report on him and got him assigned to the REME, recommended him for *bomb-disposal*. How long do you think he lasted? There are bits of him they still haven't found."

"Have you noticed," Terry said, "how Grim fixes everything according to the weather? We get PT or beasting or cross-country runs or assault-courses only if it's cold and wet."

"Right," Bob agreed. "If the weather outside is halfway decent, we're indoors, learning how to use Blanco and Brasso, or how to clean a rifle, or how to break someone's neck with our bare hands."

"'olds and rolls and throws and breakfalls," Butler snapped, getting the sergeant's voice perfectly. "I'd like to try some 'olds on Grimmy."

"He's not such a bad bloke underneath," Casper put in.

Everyone looked at him as if he'd just admitted he fancied Hitler.

Casper was a strange one. The grand obsession of his life was bird-watching. Birds of prey.

"He's a bleedin' monster, birdy-boy," Butler said. "I tell you, when I'm out of this, back behind the wheel of a bus where the Lord intended I should be, I'll be dreaming of the day Grim steps out on that zebra crossing in front of my double-decker. Bump! Oh! Have I killed you, Grim? Bloody shame! Never mind, eh?"

"But he likes you, Corporal Cockney Get," said Terry.

"Sing 'The Happy Sodding Wanderer', Geordie Shite."

"Fol-de-reeeee, fol-de-raaaarrgh-my-bollocks!" sang Terry.

Butler smiled. Bob couldn't get used to the way Butler and Terry tossed unforgivable insults at each other, yet had become friends for life within days.

Bob wondered if he wasn't getting a bit jealous. He was starting to feel Butler getting in the way of Bob and Terry, just as Terry always resented Thelma.

"Cheer up," Bob said. "It's a half-holiday tomorrow."

After two months, they were finally getting leave to visit the town for Saturday night. Apparently, there wasn't much to do besides visit the pier that almost got blown up in the Real War and hang around Walker's *Palais de Danse*. Walker's was where the local girls would be. Butler had been talking about it all week. South Coast Girls were legendary in London. Butler was full of stories about knickers lost under the pier.

Bob wondered if he'd be better for Thelma if he were





more experienced. He could imagine what she'd think, especially if he caught something. Still, he'd be away for two years.

"You'll never get any birds again, Butler," said Terry. "Not after they've had some proper Northern cock. Me and Bob'll run through 'em like a dose of salts."

"I jus' want to see somewhere that's not this bloody cage," said Casper.

There were moans of assent from up and down the hut.

"Snap inspection," someone shouted.

Grimshaw burst in like the Federal Bureau of Investigation, flanked by hard-faced corporals, pace-stick under his arm.

Everyone stood to attention by their lockers. Grimshaw started examining gear, passing brusque comments on the state of socks and confiscating copies of *Health and Efficiency* and *Tit-Bits*.

Two lockers down from Bob was Frank Spencer, a ticking bomb. His mother, one of those smothering, protective sorts, was always sending him parcels of things like vests, hot-water bottles, and tracts on the evils of drink. She also sent tins of corned beef. He told them he'd always liked it, and that his Mum must have assumed they didn't have it in the Army.

Grimshaw opened Spencer's locker, and two tins of Fray Bentos fell out.

"What's this, cuntface?"

"Two tins of c-corned beef, sergeant. From my mother."

"His Majesty's rations not good enough for you, spastic? These foreign objects are an insult to the crown. You are aware of the regulation that says you can only eat Army bully beef?"

"My Mum..."

"I'm not interested in the pox-rotted slag who birthed you between Saturday night shag sessions with Sheffield Wednesday's second team."

Irrepressible anger sparked in Spencer's eyes. "Don't you pick on my Mum," he squeaked.

In the silence, Bob's spirit shrank. Spencer, the cringing reed, had snapped and talked back. Grimshaw would show no mercy.

"So you're missing your Mum's cooking? Have to do something about that, won't we? How'd you like a 48-hour pass so's you can visit your Mum for a slap-up feed?"

Spencer was as surprised as anyone but still mistrustful. This must be a prelude to a punishment so ghastly it would go in the record books.

Bob prayed Spencer would turn down the offer.

"Nice," Spencer said.

Bob knew the abyss had just opened up.

"Very well, Spencer, your wish shall be granted. Fairy Godmother Grimshaw will see to it that you spend this weekend in the bosom of your family. However, to compensate, all other leave is withdrawn."

Twenty-nine hearts turned to stone. Even Butler's smile vanished.

"While you, Spencer, are eating home cooking, we shall endeavour to change the situation here, so the grub comes up to your high standard of cuisine. The rest of you slags will spend the weekend peeling spuds."

Spencer could still get out of it, and turn down the leave, but he was too addle-headed to see ahead more than a few minutes. Bob knew even Frank Spencer

would hardly enjoy his time at home, knowing what was waiting when he got back.

They spent Saturday in a freezing shed next to the cookhouse peeling an Everest of potatoes. Grimshaw insisted each be peeled like an apple, in a single stroke that produced a perfect spiral of peel and a completely skinless potato. Bob's fingers were cut ragged. They were so chilled and shrivelled that he couldn't feel them, but he knew agony would set in over the next few days.

Throughout it all, they talked about Frank Spencer. Terry kept up a bitter running commentary, about the warm tea and hot food he was eating.

"That Betty of his'll be giving him one right now," he said. "I bet she has to put the rubber johnny on for him, or he'd get it over his head."

There were grumbles.

Just now, much as Bob hated Grim, he hated Frank Spencer worse.

"How about a song to cheer us up?" Casper suggested, feebly. "Boiled Beef and Carrots?"

He was pelted with potatoes.

Finally, it was done. To one side was a heap of peelings as high as a man's waist. To the other tubs of naked potatoes, streaked with blood.

They sat in the hut, too exhausted to move.

Grimshaw arrived, fresh from the mess, and examined the work.

"A job well done, men."

He picked up a potato and tossed it into the air, catching it again like a cricket-ball. Then, he picked up a peeling and delicately wrapped it around the potato. It didn't quite fit.

"While you've been working, I've given some thought to the matter of your diet. Choosy types like your friend Spencer have made me wonder if the staple fare in our cookhouse is fine enough for your poor delicate tummies. After consideration, I've decided to take potatoes off the menu for a month. Tighten your bellies. Give you variety."

Bob was numbed. He couldn't follow Grimshaw.

"So," the sergeant continued, "we shan't need the fruits of your labours. This mess must be tidied away. Butler, get some flour and some buckets and make up paste. The rest of you, pay attention. By morning, you will have glued the peelings back in place. All neat and tidy. Tomorrow, we shall do the decent thing and bury the spuds with full military honours."

The next night, Butler and Terry held Frank Spencer down while the rest of the squad lined up, raw potatoes in their frostbitten fingers. They forced him to eat the cold, hard spuds. Frank sobbed, mouth bleeding, as he chewed. His teeth cracked on the stringy potato mulch.

Bob held Spencer's chin and forced him to swallow. He felt nothing.

"Come in, come in, dear boy. We meet at last!"

The Bloomsbury office was just as he had imagined a literary agent's would be: thick carpet, heavy mahogany furniture, a few cardboard boxes (manuscripts, no doubt), an occasional table with a bottle of sherry. The only things out of place were framed pictures, messy collages made of pictures scissored from books and magazines.

Kenneth Halliwell looked the part, too, wearing a silk



dressings gown, smoking a pink Sobranje in a cigarette-holder.

He pressed a desk buzzer, "Joseph, could you delight us a moment with your presence."

A man popped in. Joseph wore Russian-style bell-bottoms and a white vest. In his 30s, he was trying to look younger. His glossy hair was down over the tops of his ears.

"Bob and I are in need of some refreshment. Would you procure some tea?"

"Earl Grey, Lapsang Souchong or Ty-Phoo?"

Halliwell's assistant had a thin voice, with a little Leicester in it somewhere. Bob chose Earl Grey. It wasn't Ty-Phoo and was easier to pronounce than Lapsang Souchong. Joseph flounced out.

"I am sorry about the boy," said Halliwell. "Sometimes I think, 'if only I had a hammer...' It's so hard to get the help. Poor Joe fancies himself a writer, but he just hasn't got it. He keeps turning out silly little plays, daft experimental stuff full of obscenities. How does he imagine he'd ever get by the Lord Chamberlain?"

Halliwell picked up what Bob realized was his manuscript.

"This, on the other hand, is good. Needs a polish, but I think we have something very saleable. It's raw, it's immediate, direct. Above all it's angry, without being unpatriotic. I shouldn't think we'll have too much trouble with the censors, though I hope to Heaven we have a *little*."

"Why do you want trouble with the censors?"

Even a publishing novice like Bob knew how heavily the Lord Chamberlain could come down on a book. The *Lady Chatterley* trial had all but bankrupted Penguin, and the upholding of the Obscenity verdict by Lord Chief Justice Goddard had forced everyone to play safe.

"Because, dear boy, every time the papers report that a book worries the censors, it means an extra 10,000 copies."

Ten thousand copies! An *extra* 10,000 copies! But only if they weren't pulped by the Post Office.

"I also took the liberty of getting a Roneo of your manuscript sent to Gelbfisch."

"Schmuel Gelbfisch? The Russian film producer?"

"He's Polish actually. Well, Jewish really. Gelbfisch won't read your book himself. He has people to do that for him. Sam dodders into London every year to buy books and plays. I know he's desperate to do a film about the Indo-China War. The Russkies are just as mired in it as we are, and the right story could be terrific box-office."

He knew he was being a prat, but Bob couldn't help but imagine Albert Finney playing him, and Larushka Skikne as Terry, with Michael Caine maybe as Stan Butler. Julie Christie as Thelma, William Pratt as Grimshaw, Jack Hawkins as Molesworth, Peter O'Toole as Fotherington-Thomas. A Royal Film Premiere, with the King and the Tsarina. Queues outside the Regal, with his name up in lights.

"We're going to have to think of a title. Joseph suggested *It Ain't Half Hot, Mum*. I quite like it. Conjures the insolent cheeriness of the ordinary soldier, but also suggests sentimentality and yearning for home. What do you think?"

"Actually, Mr Halliwell..."

"Kenneth, please..."

"Actually, er, Kenneth, I don't like that at all. It's the

sort of thing a Londoner would say. I'm from the North-East."

"Oh. Pity."

"Mortar!" yelled Bob "Hit the deck!"

A second shell fell with an ill-tempered *crump* into a paddy field. A ten-foot tall column of water rose.

Everyone yelled at everyone else to take cover. Bob threw himself at the dirt next to a wooden hut. He took the safety off his SLR and chanced a peep over a low wall of baked mud. Lieutenant Gurney paced up and down about 30 yards away, right out in the open, scanning the treeline with binoculars.

"Bloody toff," said Terry, crawling up beside Bob.

"He's trying to draw their fire so's we can get some idea where they are."

"He's showing off is what he's doing," said Terry. "He's a belted earl. He has to prove he's got more guts than us proles."

A ball of oily flame engulfed the lieutenant.

"Christ in Heaven," said Terry. "I didn't mean that!"

Burning pieces of Jack Gurney filled the air. They were breathing him, choking on him.

Casper squirmed up next to them.

"See any small-arms?"

"Nowt yet. Only mortars. They just hit Lieutenant Gurney."

"That was no mortar. He trod on a mine."

Bob's stomach clenched. This wasn't a chance encounter with the treens. The platoon had been drawn into a trap.

He flinched as a machine gun opened up from the treeline about 300 yards away. Tracers churned up the ground a comfortable distance beyond the wall. Earth pattered on them.

"Aye, this spot'll do," said Casper.

He unslung a long leather case from his back and drew out a lovingly-oiled Lee-Enfield. From one of his ammunition-pouches, he took a telescopic sight wrapped in oilcloth. Neatly, he fixed the sight to the rifle.

Casper was the platoon sniper. He'd been in Indo ten days when he took the brigade trophy for skill-at-arms.

Butler came over.

"Snudge says we're to set up along here with whatever cover we can. He's put one of the Brens over to our right. He says you're to set up here too, Casper. If you clock anything wearing pyjamas, slot it and pray it's Ho Chi Mekon himself."

"Willco," Casper breathed. His mind was already miles away, willing victims to wander into his cross-hairs.

Bob was starting to be afraid of little William Casper, with his hawk-eyes and ever-mounting kill score. He was an ancient child, more bird of prey than man.

Bob, Terry and Butler sat with backs to the wall and heads well down. If Vic tried to come at them across open rice paddies, they'd hear about it soon enough.

"What are we in for?" asked Terry.

"Dunno," said Butler. "Snudge is dialling 999."

A shell burst very close to the wall. Bob's ears hurt. Nobody said anything for a while.

At the morning briefing, Captain Fisher, the battalion intelligence officer, had said this would be a routine Bryant and May raid. Everyone home in time for tea and the football results on the Forces Broadcasting Ser-



vice. It was only as the platoon was rattling along a dirt road in a couple of old Matadors that Butler told Bob why the old sweats groaned when Captain Fisher walked into the tent.

Bob had liked Fisher. He had a soft West Yorkshire accent, not a wireless announcer drawl like Gurney. He seemed an ordinary bloke. But behind his back, he was called Billy Liar. The Indo-China War in his head was long over and he was mopping up before the Victory Parade. Nothing he said bore any relationship with the truth. The way Fisher told it, all they had to do was come out here and burn down this village.

The civilians and their livestock had already been moved to a protected compound (which was what Fisher insisted they call concentration camps). This was in keeping with the policy in the British sector of depriving the Viet-Cong or any NVA infiltrators of help from the civil population.

The tactic had worked in Malaya in the 1950s, prompting Anthony Eden, the Saviour of Suez, to commit himself to the Relief of Indo-China. Eden hoped to replay World War II, with himself as Churchill and Ho Chi Minh, "that little Indo-Chinese Upstart," cast as Hitler. When France went communist after the War, they pulled out of their former colonies, leaving a few ideologues – Red Jesuits, they called them – behind. A "democratic" regime sprouted, puppeteered by French colonial die-hards who refused to follow the Paris line, but that collapsed after the humiliation visited on all those battle-hardened Maurices at Dien Bien Phu. It fell to Britain and her Empire and Commonwealth to disinfect Indo on behalf of the free world. Naturally, Russia couldn't let that happen, so Premier Kissinger got up in the Duma and pledged to match the Brits man for man and gun for gun. Eden and Kissinger both claimed to have made the first commitment to South-East Asia. The British and Russian armies each referred to their allies as "reinforcements."

It had been bloodless enough to start with, merely a matter of sending a few technicians and instructors to help the regimes in the Republic of South Vietnam. Now the commies were on the march again, with the support of plenty of folk fed up with the corrupt and incompetent succession of governments in Saigon. What had started as a "limited police action" with a few Gurkhas had in seven years become so popular it was keeping 100,000 British and 20,000 Anzac troops in work, not to mention the 150,000 Russians (and rising) who'd come along, too. Enoch Powell, Eden's successor as Prime Minister, would gladly give the whole bloody shooting-match to the Ivans, anyone dammit!, and get Britain out. But a British Government's word was its bond, and the Russians couldn't be allowed win the war on their own.

The British were supposed to be fighting American-backed communists, but strategists spent more time jockeying for position with the Russians. A *Punch* cartoon showed King Edward VIII and Tsarina Tatiana in full state uniforms standing over a map of Indo-China, squabbling about who would administer which regions "when the victory was won," while a tiny, ragged Ho said "what do you mean 'when'?"

The treens found their range. One of the eggs landed somewhere behind them, in the village. Someone yelled "first aid!"

It all happened in slow motion. Bob reckoned he should have been deafened by the racket from the explosions. Somehow, he wasn't. He was in mortal danger here and realized he was enjoying it, savouring it. It was something to write home about. This was making a man of him.

"The condemned men are entitled to a last smoke," said Terry, offering round Capstans.

They all lit up. Someone scurried over at a low crouch.

"Put those fuckers out you stupid fucks!" shouted Sergeant Snudge. "Fucking treens can see your fucking smoke a fucking mile away. Then you fuckers'll be fucking fucked."

Bob stubbed the cigarette. He knew Snudge – bloody silly name – didn't like him. None of the old lags did. They were new bugs, the sprogs, and as such bad joss. Regulars despised National Servicemen, claiming that they tended to get themselves and others killed, but the one time Bob snapped and declared himself as a volunteer, he was scorned even more openly.

"The Mekon's got us pinned," said Snudge. "We can't rush him because we don't know where he is or how strong he is, and it's over nearly-open ground. We can't do a runner because the little bastards have cut the fucking road as well. I've radioed for help, but we've to wait here until Billy Liar finds the bottle to tell Lieutenant-Colonel Windrush he's fucked up afuckinggain. Then we have to wait until Windrush finishes dithering and gets Brigade's permission to call for assistance. Just pray it's the dropshorts and not the fucking Raf. If you see any aircraft, then for fuck's sake, fucking hide. Now get dug in. If a firework comes your way before you've got a hole, flatten yourself on the dirt face-down. And keep your gob open. It'll stop you going deaf. Butler, report to Popeye, collect some spare ammo, and a crate of gold-tops and pineapples. Get yourselves nice and fucking comfy. It's going to be a fucking long day."

Bob wasn't enjoying this any more.

Terry had the spade, a crummy little thing with a handle no longer than his forearm. Eighteen inches down and he hit water. Not surprising, with a paddy field close by.

"Bollocks!" said Terry.

Two shells landed in front of them in rapid succession, spattering loose change against the wall.

Bob's ears were ringing.

"They're comin'," said Casper quietly, from behind his rifle-sight. "Usin' t'mud banks in t'paddy for cover. I see at least five. Can't get a bead on any yet."

"I'll tell Snudge and get the ammo," said Butler, crawling at speed towards the middle of the village.

Moments later, a vast cage of hot metal enveloped them. Mortar shells exploded all around, machine-gun bullets hammered the dirt wall. Any more and the wall would simply disintegrate.

Bloody Yanks.

The Mekon's Communist Allies, the United Socialist States of America, were pledged to support North Vietnam and the Viet Cong to the hilt. Except there were no actual Yanks in Indo. They'd learned a lesson invading Japan in '45 and liked to get others to do their fighting in the Pacific Rim. There was a supply route – the Casey Jones Trail – running through the warring



statelets that used to be China, all the way down to Cambodia. By the feel of it, all that Yank ordnance was being delivered right here.

Casper fired, smoothly slid his rifle-bolt back, then forward, and bit his lower lip. He'd got one.

Butler came back, dragging two wooden boxes behind him. "Help yourselves," he said. One box contained smooth, round phosphorus grenades – gold-tops. In the other were the Mills bombs – pineapples – beloved of the *Commando* comics Bob and Terry had read as kids.

They spaced out behind the wall, laying out grenades and spare magazines. They'd lost interest in digging in.

There was a bigger than usual explosion behind them. Black smoke. Popping and zipping noises. The Mekon's mortars had brewed up one of the lorries, and plenty of spare ammunition by the sound of it.

Bob was breathing too fast. Was this what a panic attack felt like?

"Terry?" he shouted.

"Kiddo?" said Terry, tightening the chinstrap on his helmet.

"Nothing," said Bob.

"Aye, mate," said Terry, smiling. "Me too."

At the far end of the wall, the Bren opened up. Short, intense bursts hammered like a pneumatic drill. Casper fired over and over, working his rifle-bolt like the pistons of the Flying Scotsman.

Bob peered over the wall, saw the top of a head – a shock of black hair – over a little mud-bank a hundred yards off. He aimed, squeezed the trigger – almighty bang! – and missed. The Bren tore up water and mud. Bob jammed himself against the wall, head well down, and held the rifle over his head with both hands, working the trigger with his thumb, trying to stop the thing flying out of his hands, firing in the general direction of the enemy.

A gold-top exploded like some pure white blossom, sending thin trails zipping out in every direction, searing squiggles into his eyeballs. Gleaming aluminium roared overhead. Trees burned like a Guy Fawkes bonfire.

"Canberras!" shouted Butler.

"*English Electric Canberras*," said Bob.

The napalm and the heat of the engines made the air look like the clear, freezing water of a brook in the Yorkshire Dales.

The Main Humanities Lecture Hall of the University of Sussex was packed to capacity. Students even sat cross-legged in the aisles. There were nearly a thousand of them out there, all impossibly young and fresh. Bob had only a couple of years on the older ones, but they looked as if they came from another world. Clean-cut girls in college scarves and duffel-coats; Beetniki aping Russian style in goatee beards, bell-bottoms and Afghan coats; clever, angry lads from pit villages and factory towns; ironic, waspish waifs who had failed Oxbridge entrance and were going the plateglass route.

"Settle down, please," said Dr Dixon from the podium.

Bob hadn't wanted to come, but Kenneth had pleaded. It would get into the papers, it would sell more books.

He glanced across the stage at the men with whom he would debate. Francis Urquhart, the local MP, was talking down to the bewildered Jim Hacker, a former Eden protégé serving his time as a Junior Minister. The

government spokesmen sat unsubtly to the right, while Bob was next to Howard Kirk, reader in Sociology, who took the extreme left. Author of *The Russians Can Bloody Have Constantinople*, a book about radical opposition to British imperialism, the long-haired academic smoked a roll-up with casual arrogance.

"I suppose this is as quiet as it's going to be," said Dixon, nervously, "perhaps we can get started."

There was a uproar and cheering as a group of students unfurled a long banner. They wore American-style broad-brimmed hats and sleeveless leather jackets with red tin sheriff-star badges. Dixon attempted an apologetic smile that came out as a grimace. The 30-foot-long banner declared WORKERS AND INTELLECTUELS UNITE AGAINST ANGLO-RUSSIAN IMPERIALISM IN INDO-CHINA.

Urquhart sneered at the misspelling. Hacker asked to have it pointed out, then laughed loudly at "intellectuels." Men with cameras – press? – took pictures of the banner.

His book had been out for five weeks and garnered good reviews. Bernard Levin, Malcolm Muggeridge and Christopher Booker praised him in the *Times*, *Punch* and the *Statesman*. Even a blimp called Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart, drafted by the *Daily Telegraph* to pass comment, acknowledged Bob had "seen a thing or two," though he finally dismissed the book as "a rather insolent eructation from the ranks."

Dixon introduced the panel. The politicians were hissed, which upset Hacker but steeled Urquhart's contempt for young people. Kirk grinned and waved at the regimented clapping which greeted him. This was not an impartial crowd.

"And finally," said Dixon, "an Indo-China veteran who, as author of *It Ain't Half Hot, Mum*, has done much to bring into the public arena questions about British involvement in the war."

Students cheered and whistled. For him! They kept on cheering. Kirk was a bit put out. Bob was puzzled, but thrilled. At last, he had his hero's welcome, from people who had looked down at him all his life.

"Perhaps we could begin," said Dixon, "by asking Bob for an assessment of the feelings of the ordinary soldier about service in Indo-China. Do the troops feel as though they don't belong there?"

Over and again, Captain Vinh had asked the same question, between punches, slaps, and blows from rifle-butts. Bob never did have an answer. For Vimto or anyone else.

"To be honest," he said, "most squaddies have no strong opinion on whether they should be there or not. They've been called up..."

"What I think Bob's trying to say," interrupted Kirk, "is that our soldiers have been lied to by the British and Russian governments. Well over 90 percent of our servicemen in Indo-China are conscripts..."

"What I think Bob's trying to say," interrupted Urquhart, "is that our splendid lads are doing their duty like honest, loyal patriots..."

"What I think Bob is saying is..." interrupted Hacker.

He never got the chance to finish. The hall erupted. Some students jeered and whistled, the others chanted "Heavens no, we won't go!"

Most boys here would have National Service deferred so they could complete their education. Then they'd be



called up. At least half would end up in Indo during their two years. Bob wasn't sure how he felt about the politics, but he honestly couldn't blame them for not wanting to go. He'd been stupid enough to volunteer.

"This war is none of our business," shouted Kirk above the din, to huge cheers. Urquhart tried to say something about an international duty to save the world from the evils of American Communism. Hacker looked queasy.

Over to the side of the stage, a tall, muscular middle-aged bloke in a suit, short hair, thin lips, definitely ex-military – Hacker's bodyguard? – spoke into a walkie-talkie.

A knot of men in brown corduroy trousers and polo-neck sweaters moved rapidly down the left-hand edge of the hall towards the stage. Bob knew at once these were serious people, not like the rich poseurs wearing Red Chic slouch hats and tin stars.

He reached for the commando-knife taped as always to his ankle. Then he remembered he was the hero here. They'd be after the MPs.

Objects flew.

Bob's entire body flinched, and he fought the urge to throw himself flat on the stage. He heard explosions and gunfire, but it was just the slamming of spring-hinged wooden seat-bottoms as kids stood up.

He looked at Hacker and Urquhart, who were cringing behind a human wall. The bodyguard's broad back was splattered with egg-yolks.

Bob shook, uncontrollably.

*With a straight face, Captain Fisher assured us our action had been an outstanding success. We had killed 15 Viet-Cong, wounded another 20 and captured two machine guns and 42 assorted small-arms, all American-made. We listened in astonishment. There was only our platoon involved and as soon as the Raf pounded what may or may not have been enemy positions, the trees just faded away. I only saw a single dead enemy – the one Casper hit – and we certainly didn't carry off any weapons. Our score was one dead lieutenant – posthumous VC, of course, for the 14th Earl – and three men wounded. Nonetheless "Billy Liar" wrote it up as a victory. I don't know if anybody higher up the chain of command really believes him, but my impression is that we are sinking further into the mire of Indo because "Fisher" is too soft-hearted to tell his superiors how badly we're doing. In turn, they are too timid to tell the generals, who keep the worst of it from Enoch Powell, who tells the King we won the War in 1964. The only people who realize we're losing are sergeants, and they're as inscrutable as hateful buddhas. If they had any opinions of their own, they'd die rather than let them out. Believe me, I've seen that happen.*

In the senior common room Bob drank whisky with Dixon, Kirk and a few others. After the Minister and the MP fled, Kirk had turned the meeting into an anti-war rally, hijacking Bob's book for his political ends. Bob flustered and turned red at first, but part of him enjoyed the hero-worship of a thousand passionate and intelligent young people. And it was hard to argue with Kirk's line that Britain had no business in Indo-China.

Dixon came over, evidently half-cut. "You know, old man, we tried to get your pal to come along."

"Terry?" The name was a stone in Bob's mouth.

"He's controversial, isn't he? Does he mean it?"

He was vaguely surprised Terry hadn't come up earlier.

"Yes, Dr Dixon."

"Jim, please."

"Yes, Jim. Terry means what he says."

Bob hadn't seen Terry since coming back, and Terry had made no attempt to contact him. Most people thought what Terry had done was treasonable, but Bob hadn't written it that way. The least he could do was give his oldest friend the benefit of a doubt.

Would Terry have got three cheers from the students? Yes, he probably would.

"Hello," said a woman. Bob looked into startling eyes. She was in her late teens or early 20s and slim, with long straight hair and an elfin face. She wore blue corduroy bell-bottoms and an embroidered Afghantsy coat.

"Bob, this is Diana. Diana Scott."

"I'm a drama student," she said. "I'm with Howard. Dr Kirk."

Bob guessed what that meant. Lucky bastard.

A woman in early middle age bustled into the room, all smiles and theatrical kisses.

"Who's that?" said Bob.

"Howard's wife," admitted Diana. "Probably come to collect him. It's her birthday. They're going to the theatre. The latest Rattigan. Howard's looking forward to shredding it."

He looked funny at her, trying to work it out. She sighed and smiled indulgently. Bob must seem amazingly provincial to her. He was painfully conscious of his accent.

"It's an open marriage. They're well-known for it. They regard wedlock as patriarchal and exploitative."

Bob had read about this kind of thing in the *Observer*. Him and Thelma would be in bed together of a Sunday morning, with the papers. He'd make fun of it, but secretly be envious; she'd be disgusted, but be secretly threatened.

That was back when they were still sharing a bed. Recently, Thelma was losing interest in sex, and objected to him screaming in his sleep. Then there was the business of keeping the commando-knife under the pillow. Just in case burglars came in when they were asleep, he said.

Everybody nagged them both about having kids.

"Come on, Bob," said Diana. "I don't want to spend the rest of the evening drowning in sherry with these tweedy codgers. There's a wine bar just opened in town. From there we can go on to a discotheque."

They had 72 hours' leave. Lieutenant Noote, the padre, had tried to muster a team for "a game of footer against our ARVN friends." Bob was deputed to tell him that the platoon would rather spend time in Saigon.

It was hard to explain without mentioning whores. Bob knew Noote understood the situation exactly, but still felt guilty for disappointing the poor man. The padre was okay.

He tried not to think about Thelma.

During awkward pauses in the conversation, Noote's office rattled with skiffle from his wireless. Mostly, the Forces Broadcasting Service played ballads and big band, but there was one anarchic announcer – Simon Dee – who played Lonnie Donegan, Chas McDevitt and Ray Ellington, and was starting to give needle-time to



radical new music coming out of Russia and Ireland and even Great Britain.

You never heard Lulu or Cilla Black, who sang as if they were desperate for a shag, on *Two-Way Family Favourites*, and certainly you never heard Alan Price or the Quarrymen, or Newcastle's own People's Balladeer, Alan Hull. Those songs made Bob feel things he'd couldn't say out loud. Angry, joyous, sexual, Northern things. He couldn't hear Price's "Kalinka" without wanting to explode, and there was something dreadful in the Quarrymen's "gallant cossack horsemen in their thousands dying" he couldn't get out of his mind.

*Saigon would have been wonderful if there wasn't a war on. All the mystery of the orient combined with the chic of France, the former colonial power. Many of the buildings are elegant, the food – if you can be bothered to wander beyond the NAAFI – is a marvellous mixture of French and oriental, the streets are full of bustle and life. Whole families riding on Russian motorbikes, street traders selling cigarettes and souvenirs, kids asking for buckshee... and the women. But before a squaddy could find himself a nice girl and exchange ten shillings for three or four minutes of true love, he had to get tanked up. That was easy in Saigon, if dangerous. Walking into a bar where the Anzacs were drinking was asking to be duffed up. When Aussies get more than two "tubes" of Fosters in them, they start wondering what they are doing in Indo. Then they reason Britain got them in the war. Their next impulse is to find a Pom and knock his teeth out.*

The air was thick with the screeches: "I want you give me one, Tommy." "Bet you fancy me, Brian." "Sucky-fucky, ten-bob note!"

As Terry negotiated with some 15-year-old street angel, her younger sister was draping herself around Bob, fingers fluttering against his fly.

"I love you long-time, Tommy," she cooed in his ear. "Do you fine knee-trembler?"

Butler came along and unpeeled the girl.

Bob wanted to deck the cockney bastard. But he was also grateful. The longer he was in Indo, the harder he found it to be unfaithful to Thelma. At first, like everyone, he had been on holiday; all arrangements were suspended, all bets were off. Sex was affordable and available all the time, and no one thought less of you for whoring.

Every time, he thought more about Thelma and disappointed himself. The funny thing was that sometimes he couldn't even remember what Thelma looked like.

All around him were tiny, pretty faces. Almond eyes dark as night, tiny teeth sharp as pins.

"Watch the door, our kid," Terry said, as he and Bob went upstairs.

Bob nodded.

Often, soldiers were interrupted in *flagrante* by chopper-waving young men claiming to be brothers or *fiancés* of supposedly nice girls. It took a lot more than ten bob to square them.

Down the street, a radio was playing. "A Mouse Lived in a Windmill in Old Amsterdam," Ronnie Hilton. All signs were in faded French and Vietnamese, battered English and new-painted cyrillic. Everywhere, there were posters for Vimto. Some of the whores believed douching with the stuff prevented conception and VD.

The Russians were taking over in Indo-China, relieving the British in the south, particularly the Mekong and the Piedmont areas. The Brits ran the show on the coastal plains and the highlands, where most guerrilla activity was. HM Forces had more practice at dealing with that than Ivan. Popeye Popplewell said the year before you could get "sucky-fucky" in Saigon for half a crown. The Russkies drove prices up, and wore girls out. They did everything to excess. Including, so dark rumour had it, commit war crimes.

A staff car cruised by, scattering children. In the back, an ARVN officer sat bolt upright, with more braid on his uniform than a cinema usher. With him sat a veiled Dragon Lady, one of the daughters of Fu Manchu.

An ox-cart got in the way and the car stopped. The officer stood up to shriek at a peasant, who shrugged. The officer ordered his driver to reverse. The Dragon Lady leaned forward to whisper in the driver's ear and something flashed. The driver's head tilted back, a red yawn opening in his throat. Bob saw, but the officer didn't.

A tiny gun went off, and the top of the officer's head came off in his hat. He tumbled out of the car like an unstrung Muffin the Mule.

The Dragon Lady vaulted out of the car, *ao dai* riding up to reveal bare and boyish calves. She paused, pointing a gloved hand at Bob. Her ladylike gun was almost swallowed by her velvet fist.

His guts were ice. The sound was turned way down.

A breeze lifted the veil and he saw a man's face. A European face. The world wasn't making sense.

Then he was gone and noise fell in on Bob. Ronnie Hilton was still singing that a windmill with mice in was hardly surprising. The staff car's engine was still turning over.

Terry and Butler came down, buttoning up, big grins on their stupid faces. Bob was still shivering.

Whistles sounded. Bob looked at faces in the street. No one had made any more attempt than he had to detain the assassin. No one seemed even to notice anything unusual.

Terry took charge and got them out of there before the police arrived.

"Blimey, Bob," said Butler. "Can't leave you alone for a minute."

*On our last evening in Pay-Gone there was an ENSA concert hosted by Simon Dee in an aircraft hangar on the edge of town. The comedian was supposed to be Terry Milligan, but he was cancelled by the Ministry of Defence because he'd thrown a batter pudding at 10 Downing Street in protest at the war. Instead, we got Arthur Askey dressed as a bumble-bee. Cliff Richard came on and brought the house down with "I've Got Sixpence," Britain's Eurovision entry that year. I think even he was surprised at the way everyone sang along, but he probably wasn't aware of the superstition among troops in Indo. On the exact date when you have just six months' service left you start a "chuff chart." Thereafter, you tick off each day as it passes. This gave rise to a song popular in camps and barracks throughout South-East Asia:*

*I've got six months, lousy \*\*\*\*ing six months,*

*Six months to hang on to my life,*

*I've got two months to whore, two months to be sore,*

*And two months to get cured for my wife.*



*You won't have read in the papers about what happened next. The censors like you to think our troops are wholesome chaps who suspend their sexual desire for the duration of hostilities until they can go home and get married. That night, as a troupe of go-go dancers called Pan's People kicked into their routine, 2,000 battle-scarred squad-dies rushed the stage. Vietnamese girls are beautiful, but they don't look like the girls back home. We'd none of us seen a girl from back home for quite a while. In their spangled union jack shorts and halters, with long white legs and bulging breasts, Pan's People were the girls from home we had all been imagining every night. Any man in the audience would have raped the pack of them – seeing on each the faces of his fiancée, girlfriend, some shopgirl, a meter maid – while the rest of us cheered him on.*

*Redcaps came in with firehoses and doused our ardour. I understand two blokes were crushed in the chaos. I wonder what they told the families.*

Diana had a rich father and a Triumph Spitfire. It made getting to Avening a lot simpler. All morning they'd driven through the Cotswold countryside, stopping for a pub lunch of cheese, beer and fresh bread. No scampi and chips in a basket here. This was England as everyone wanted it to be. With the aid of the AA map, they'd finally found Avening and asked a man at the local garage for directions to the Powell place.

In the back garden, next to a heap of uncut firewood, was a battered Land Rover. The cottage was tiny, cut into the side of a hill at the top of a country lane. It seemed unusually modest for the home of the director of *A Matter of Life and Death*.

Bob knocked. Somewhere a dog barked. The door opened. A small man in his 60s answered. He wore a cardigan and frayed carpet-slippers. He had a small, meticulously-groomed moustache, a large, bony, bald head and huge, bright eyes.

For a moment, he said nothing. Then he noticed Diana. He smiled at her.

"Who's your agent, then?"

Diana giggled. "Haven't got one."

"But you are an actress?"

"How did you guess?"

"With your looks it would be a sin not to be an actress, or perhaps a King's mistress."

Bob cleared his throat.

"In you come then," said Powell to Diana. "You as well," to Bob. "I suppose you're the chap who had the memorable adventures in Indo-China."

"That's right," said Bob. "Have you been sent my book?"

"Unfortunately, yes," said the old man, leading them into a small, cosy living room. "Earl Grey or Lapsang Souchong?"

"Lapsang Souchong," said Bob.

"And you, my dear? You remind me of a pre-Raphaelite model. Cup of tea?"

"PG Tips'll do me fine," said Diana, taking off her coat and flopping onto a sofa.

"Good girl. I'm all out of the posh teas anyway. Temporary financial embarrassment. Haven't made a movie for three years. And that was a nudist flick for a Greek friend."

Powell went off to busy himself with the kettle. Bob took off his crombie and sat next to Diana. She had

never heard of Michael Powell and barely recollected the films he had made with his Hungarian partner, Imre Pressburger. But she was an actress, and a movie director was a movie director. No wonder the cunning little vixen had insisted on driving him down here.

Until two weeks ago, Bob hadn't heard of Michael Powell either. Him and Terry had gone to the pictures twice a week for 15 years and knew all the actors and actresses, but couldn't imagine why anybody would read credits. Kenneth had to explain to him the difference between a producer and a director. However, when given a list of Powell's films, Bob realized he had seen most of them back when they were kids, though Terry had insisted they not go to see *The Red Shoes*, which Thelma had been interested in, because it was a girlies' film, about ballet.

When the Gelbfisch corporation bought the rights to *It Ain't Half Hot, Mum*, Bob had gone to London to meet one of Gelbfisch's producers, a hyperactive young Italian (actually he insisted he was Sicilian), Martino Scorsese. Through the producer's excited discourse Bob gathered Gelbfisch thought it best to have a British director for this subject, and he, Scorsese, had just the man in mind.

A man who hadn't worked for three years, had been rude about his book within moments of meeting him, and was now trying to seduce his girlfriend.

"Sugar, anyone?" shouted Powell from the kitchen.

"No thanks," said Diana.

"Three for me please," said Bob.

"Only joking," said Powell. "I'm afraid I don't have any."

In a tiny cinema at an advertising agency's offices in Soho, Scorsese had shown him *The Red Shoes*. It was about a young ballerina and a ruthless White Yank impresario played by John Barrymore who told her she could be happy in love or be a great artist but not both. Scorsese sighed with pleasure every time Barrymore appeared. Terry had been right about it being a daft girlie film, but Bob found himself in tears at the end when the company performed the ballet without Moira Shearer, who had just killed herself. Maybe it was Scorsese's enthusiasm, but Bob was moved – perhaps even upset – by the film. He couldn't forget it, even if he didn't like it.

Thelma said something similar about Bob's book.

Powell's career stalled in 1960, when his *Peeping Tom* was refused a certificate by the Lord Chamberlain's Office and the negative impounded by the police. It was allegedly the most disgusting picture ever made in Britain, but of course no one would ever know. Since then, he had only shot "glamour" films – silent strip-off shorts lasting one reel or, more bluntly, the length of the average wank – and *Naked Than Nude*. Scorsese desperately wanted to get Powell working again.

Powell came back with the tea.

"Didn't bring any Scotch, did you?"

"No, I'm sorry," said Bob.

"Pity," said Powell. "I asked Gelbfisch's representative on earth to get you to bring me a bottle. It's the least I deserve for having waded through your book."

Bob was burning at this persistent rudeness.

"I noticed a pub in the village," said Diana. "They won't have called time yet. I'll go and get a bottle."

"There's no need."

"It won't take a minute. I insist."

She pulled on her coat and disappeared.

"Sit at the table," said Powell, "and I'll explain what



I'm going to do."

Bob did as he was told, and accepted a cup of sugarless tea.

"I'll make this movie," said Powell, fixing him with inquisitor's eyes. "Not because of your wretched book. I'll do it for the money, but mainly I'll do it for little Scorsese. He's watched all my films, dozens of times. He was quoting great lumps of dialogue to me over the phone the other day. I've been here for years. The phone wouldn't ring for weeks at a time. Then this crazy Sicilian calls."

On the table was the figure of a winged lion, painted gold. Powell picked it up and fidgeted with it for a moment, drifting off into a personal reverie.

"Look," Bob started.

"You didn't come all the way down here to be insulted?"

"If you don't like the book, why don't we just forget it?"

"Should never have put it between hard covers, Bob. It's a penny dreadful, a poorly-written compendium of clichés. Some nice yarns in it, I admit, but there are two reasons I dislike it. First, there's no magic, no poetry. Second, and this is far more important, there's a great dishonesty at the heart of it. Haven't got a fag on you, have you?"

Bob fished a packet of Strands and his new Dunhill lighter from his pocket and flung them onto the table. Powell put a cigarette in his mouth and offered one to Bob. Bob refused. Powell lit his cigarette, passed the lighter back, and stuffed the packet into the pocket of his cardigan.

"Now," said Powell, "you're feeling hard-done-by. You're probably trying to think of a way of saying how dare I insult you after all you've been through that won't sound petulant."

Bob shook his head. "I don't care whether you like the book or not."

"Of course you do!" he smiled. "You're being dishonest again. Now, what we need is a shopping list."

Powell took an envelope from a letter-rack and produced a stub of pencil.

"Unpaid rates bill. Should be big enough to make the list of the things we're going to have to change."

"That's enough!" said Bob, standing up. "I'm a frigging war-hero, me. I don't have to put up with this."

"Sit down!" snapped Powell. "Have one of your cigarettes."

*Do as the man says, Bobby, or thee and me'll have a major falling-out.*

Survivor-Guilt, again.

There was plenty in the book that was dishonest, Bob knew. He couldn't go on too much about the whores with Thelma reading over his shoulder as he typed. Not that that mattered any more. She'd found out about him carrying on with Diana. All the train-trips to London and overnight stays, pretending he was on business to do with the book. The marriage had been in trouble anyhow. Compared to his new friends, Thelma was just so trivial in her concerns, so boring. They wanted to change the world, she wanted to change the curtains.

Bob took a Strand without lighting it.

*I wasn't talking about Thelma, Bobby lad. This rude old get here has tumbled the Other Thing, hasn't he? The unfinished business.*

"As it happens, I had another offer yesterday. The reputation, no matter how unearned, of having made





the most shocking film ever shot in Britain can sometimes be helpful. So, either I film your book, or I make *Confessions of a Radiogram Repair Man*, a sex-comedy which has precious little sex and isn't funny. But it's British, and our cinemas are swamped with Russian police films, Australian musicals and German horror movies. I do have yet another choice, to starve, but I don't much fancy that.

"Bob, you rightly believe you've had hard times and have earned certain rights. So you have. Fair enough. But you can't expect medals from an audience. They don't automatically care about your suffering. They'll buy their tickets and want something in return. Two hours of magic, wonder, terror, laughter and tears. Gelbfisch bought your book, and Martino, bless him, is giving it to me. You now forfeit any rights you have in this work, and gracefully pass them on to the experts. It'll be an exploration. We'll find out things you don't know about yourself. Maybe things you don't want to know."

Bob was afraid, but couldn't let it show. He sighed, smiled and shook his head in resignation.

"Whatever you say, Mr P."

"Call me Micky."

Diana returned with a bottle of Johnnie Walker.

"Just the ticket, my dear," said Powell, patting the chair next to him. "Come sit. Bob, are we on exes?"

"Eh?"

"Expenses. Did Martino float you any of Sam Gelbfisch's wonga for development?"

"Couple of hundred quid."

Powell's eyes twinkled.

"Excellent. We must adjourn to somewhere more amenable. Bob, be a good fellow and toddle into the village and get a jerrican of three-star. Then we can take the Land Rover. Harvey's in Bristol, I think. Imre tells me great things about the new chef."

As Bob left, he noticed Powell patting Diana's knee. There was no resemblance, physical or vocal, but Micky Powell reminded him of Terry.

"You lot, get out to the mortar pits and piss on them."

"Come again, Sarge?"

"Water's low and the mortar tubes are overheating. Your piddle'll cool them down for a while. Get cracking."

"Why-nor," said Terry, "me grandbairns'll never believe I passed water for King and Country."

Bob and Butler laughed a little too loud, a little too long. They pulled on helmets and their new Russian-made flak-jackets and ran out of the bunker at a crouch to the battalion mortar-pits.

This was Day 67 or 68 of the siege of Khe Sanh, depending on which reckoning you used. By chuff-chart, it was Day 42, exactly six weeks before Bob was due to ship home. And Terry, Butler and Casper. If they got out of this place. There wasn't an airstrip any more. The Viet-Cong and the NVA had pushed the perimeter in that close. It was ten days since the last transport, a Blackburn Beverley, had attempted a landing. It lay in a blackened, twisted heap inside what had become enemy territory two days ago.

Behind the mortar pits, a small queue of men lay on their bellies. A corporal ushered them in, one at a time, to have a burst on the tubes. Bob had got over being piss-shy after about two minutes in Indo-China.

As the perimeter shrank, 8,000 men and 60 artillery pieces were noosed into a smaller and smaller area of rocky, messed-up orange soil. Every enemy shell had been carried over the mountains on the back of a peasant, but now every shell was pulling its weight. There were dozens of casualties each day and they could only be evacuated by helicopter. The Army and Air Force were overstretched and the Navy was pressed into service, taking the wounded out to *HMS Bulwark* somewhere out off the coast.

The brass were getting edgy about sending the wokkas. You could tell when they were coming, not by the sound of their engines or rotors, but by the enemy machine-guns and ack-ack opening up on them all along the valley. Now they only flew in in the thick fog that covered everything until the late morning, but the treens had the range of the landing-strip, and threw everything they had at it anyway.

"You next," said the corporal. Bob scuttled into the sandbagged pit where half a dozen men, stripped to the waist, worked the mortars.

"Over here," said a squat little bloke with fair hair and a black beard. Everyone had beards now. If there'd been water for shaving they wouldn't have to Jimmy Riddle on the artillery. "Try to give it a hosing from the middle down to the bottom. If you've not got enough, concentrate on the bottom."

They'd been here more than two months. At first, they'd been on "offensive patrols" but found nothing. In the dense elephant grass and bamboo thickets, you couldn't see anyone not holding a gun to your nose. Mostly, they'd been holding a shrinking perimeter, living in holes in the ground covered in sandbags and oil-drums and empty shell-casings full of dirt, trying to ignore the rats, being shelled and shot at by snipers every hour of the day, wondering if they'd ever be able to sleep again.

Bob undid his fly and pissed. The mortar-tube hissed and a cloud of toxic steam billowed up from it. The little bloke studied his work with interest. The poor sod was only doing his job.

It was bad enough that the wokkas couldn't get casualties out, much worse that they couldn't get supplies in. Food and ammo were low. Three divisions were supposed to be fighting their way up to break the siege, but no sign of them yet. The Raf dropped HE and napalm all over the jungle to no effect. The treens moved their big guns to new positions every night.

"Nice one, son," said the blonde bloke. "Cover your ears."

A round was dropped into the tube. Bob put his hands to his ears and turned away with his cock still hanging out. The shell went away with a nasty, loud "boink!"

"I'd put that away if I was you," said the blonde bloke. "Send in the next one, would yer?"

Bob buttoned up and scrambled out of the pit. "You're in, Butler... Ha-ha! You're in - urine - get it?"

Captain Fisher had given a compulsory lecture, which was supposed to convince the men that there was no comparison between the British position at Khe Sanh and the Free French debacle at Dien Bien Phu. No, Captain Fisher said, this was more like the British at Kohima-Imphal, where General Slim lured the Japs into



wearing themselves out by attacking a strong position, then defeated them. That night, someone finally settled Billy Liar's hash. Person or persons unknown sneaked into Fisher's billet and cooked off a gold-top in his sleeping-bag. "White-saucing" was by no means an uncommon fate for unpopular officers and NCOs. Lieutenant-Colonel Windrush didn't even bother to start an enquiry. The bush telegraph had it that the CO was crackers or hitting the bottle, or simply just as pleased as everyone else that his intelligence officer had vaporized.

Crackers or not, Windrush had more important things to worry about.

Crouching behind the sandbags of the mortar-pit, Bob wondered whether or not to make a run for the billet. Along with food, water and ammo, cover was in short supply.

Khe Sanh was, in Army parlance, a super-sangar, a fort and artillery base on a plateau deep in the Annamite mountains, surrounded by other mountains, near the border with North Vietnam and Laos. Its artillery covered the main NVA infiltration route into South Vietnam. Billy Liar aside, the Viet-Cong and the NVA – and their friends in Debs DC – certainly saw it as Britain's Dien Bien Phu. Its loss could finally force the British to pull out of Indo-China. That would prompt the Australians and New Zealanders to leave too. The Russians might be unwilling to stay on by themselves. Potentially, the future of communism in South East Asia hung on this rat-infested, rust-coloured shit-hole on top of a mountain in the middle of a load of bigger mountains.

The big NVA guns, 155mms, opened up from their positions on the Co Roc Ridge about four miles away. In Laos. In another country.

"Best stay put for a bit, eh?," Butler sniggered. "Bloomin' marvellous, innit? I've been taking diarrhoea pills for the last month so's I can get good and constipated and keep the number of bog-trips I have to make at an absolute minimum. Now we get orders to evacuate bodily wastes. I'm going to write to my MP about this."

"Well, stick me in the envelope along with the letter. I've had enough of this now, I want to go home," said Terry.

Three 155mm shells crashed onto the airstrip in rapid succession.

"Hell's bells," said Terry. "Anyone got a tab?"

"Only these," said Bob, fishing a packet of Players No 6 from a pocket at the side of his flak-jacket. "I was reading in the *Mirror* the other week that the fag company makes these specially as going-to-work gaspers. You have your nasty cheap little Number 6s at the factory or the office. Then, when you go out in the evening, to the pub or club, like, you have your proper king-sized fags."

"Wouldn't mind being down the club this evening. What day is it?"

"Saturday, man."

"Never mind!" said Butler. "That means there'll be a film show in the parish hall tonight. Wonder what it'll be?"

"Same as it's been for the last five weeks," said Terry. "The Reverend Noote will run *The Browning Version*, a travelogue called *This is Belgium* and Cliff Richard in *Summer Holiday*."

"spect you're right," said Butler. "Never thought I'd

get sick of the sight of a bus."

"You think you've got problems?" said Terry. "I'm having strange erotic fantasies about shoving a Mills Bomb up Melvin Hayes's jacksie."

Casper emerged from the mortar pit.

"Getting a bit crowded this side," said Butler. "Shall we make a run for it?"

Casper gazed at the sky, thought for a moment, then nodded. He hadn't said anything in two weeks. People dealt with the strain of the constant shelling in different ways. Casper was no crazier than anyone else. To Butler, Bob and Terry, he was becoming something of a lucky charm. There was no logical reason, just that everyone was getting superstitious.

Before he stopped talking, Casper explained that if he looked at the jungle down a rifle-sight, his spirit soared like a kestrel over the trees, enabling him to see treens hidden from ordinary men's eyes. He popped off shots regularly, but there was no way of knowing if he scored any kills. Casper was satisfied that each bullet told.

Casper led off and the rest followed, separated by a couple of paces, making for the big underground bunker known as the Parish Hall. It was the battalion briefing-room, storage-space and place of entertainment. The flicks would be starting in an hour or so, and there was no sense in going back to their billet only to have to run over here again later. They'd just have to be early.

"Ah fuck! Ah fuck, fuck, fuck!" said Terry as they scurried through the bunker's entrance.

"What's up, our kid?" asked Bob.

Terry pointed to a blackboard. TONIGHT'S LECTURE. ESCAPE AND EVASION TECHNIQUES. ALL ATTEND. Terry took a piece of greying paper from his bum pocket. His chuff-chart. He tore it to confetti.

## To be concluded next month

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**Kim Newman** and **Eugene Byrne** are well-known for their previous stories set in the alternative timeline of the United Socialist States of America: "In the Air" (IZ 42), about Buddy Holly meeting Jack Kerouac in the late "Caponist" era of the 1950s; "Ten Days That Shook the World" (IZ 48), about Dashiell Hammett and other folks getting caught up in the Eugene Debs-led revolution of 1917; "Tom Joad" (IZ 65), about unrest in the 1930s USSA; "Abdication Street" (IZ 105), about Prince Charles's wooing of a TV make-up girl in 1970s Czarist Russia; and "Citizen Ed" (IZ 113), about the ghastly exploits of serial killer Ed Gein.



Once again, on 28 May, sf literati were lured to the Science Museum by the Clarke Award ceremony and copious free wine. Administrator Paul Kincaid gave the usual run-down of nominees and judges; 1996 winner Paul McAuley took the magic envelope and, remembering his own pangs of suspense, ripped it open as fast as he could to announce the winner as ... Amitav Ghosh, for *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Before the applause, an instant's blank silence hinted that many of the audience had not expected and/or not read this one. Whether the decision will go down in history as "controversial" is thus interestingly uncertain – as yet. A few people muttered "Pity about *Blue Mars*," but I failed to detect the wrathful whetting of knives that followed the 1993 non-win of *Red Mars*. Stephen (Voyage) Baxter smiled bravely. Jo Fletcher, publisher of another nominee (N. Lee Wood, likewise present), was heard to say sporting things about the choice being a good one. I'd better go and read it.... Party fashion high-lights included the resplendent gent's suitings of P. Kincaid (three-piece) and N. Spinrad (green velvet), although several chaps seemed distracted from these by Molly Brown's mini-skirt.

## THE DEMON BREED

**Steve Richard Bachman**, allegedly dead *alter ego* of Stephen King, has posthumously acquired a middle name. Signing "old Bachman cheques" for tipping-in to a limited edition of RB's *The Regulators*, King included a "Richard Cthulu Bachman"....

**Harlan Ellison**, selling off his old review copy of Curt Siodmak's *The Third Ear* (1971), peps it up with a characteristically understated inscription. The review "became an icon of terror and treachery in my career, as it was a review that two SF professionals (friends of Mr Siodmak) interpreted as being undeserved, and they decided to 'get even' by ruining my ability to sell my work. To screw my career & life. / They didn't succeed, but only because I hired a P.I., discovered their machinations, unmasked them, and brought them to book. 2 well-known professional writers. / And when one of them dies, I'll happily reveal the names, and release the documentation." Cool!

**Neil Gaiman** fell victim to the hideous Curse of *Fantasy Encyclopedia* pages 380-1, wherein authors who were correctly dated in the proofs mysteriously appear as e.g. (1960-FRANKENSTEIN MOVIES). "I hope it's not a prediction of things to come: 'Mr Gaiman did not die, exactly, but many bits of him have attained a virtual immortality starring in Frankenstein Movies. Mr



Gaiman's right hand is on the shelf in the castle in *Frankenstein Has Risen Up Again* and his stomach is attached to the monster in *Scary Terror of Frankenstein*. His arms and kidneys were in the "organ donor" scene of *Frankenstein Goes Disco Mama*, but wound up on the cutting room floor...."

**John Gribbin** grumps and brags: "Frustrated by being unable to find a home for my excellent sf novel *Time Switch*, I have measured the age of the Universe." In May, Simon Goodwin, JG & Martin Hendry announced new galactic measurements (using Hubble Space Telescope data) eliminating the former astronomical embarrassment of the Universe seemingly being younger than some of its component stars....

**Robert Holdstock** is feeling critically put-upon. "The last issue of *Vector* carried an astonishing article revealing the 'castration complex' that lies at the heart of my **Mythago Wood** cycle of novels. I am still reeling from the shock! After 17 years of living (contentedly) with comments along the lines of 'uses Jungian archetypes/probably fucks trees,' I'd become comfortable with Jung. Now I've got the whole of that bugger Freud to read, just so I can go on the defensive at conventions when challenged about my relationship with father figures!"

**John Jarrold**, now established at Simon & Schuster, announces that the new S&S sf/fantasy list will be launched next Easter under the imprint name Spectrum.

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Convention Horrors.** Terry Pratchett bemusedly reports that Fantasticon in May, intended to pack the Harrogate Centre with 1,500 people, shrank to approximately 200 in a hotel (the Centre helpfully responded to late enquiries with "It's been cancelled"). Michael Swanwick was one of many to convey the gleeful news of a mass 5:30am hotel evacuation at Disclave in Maryland, when some seeker after strange pleasures in the "alt.sex.bondage" party area lashed a fellow fun-lover to a sprinkler which then broke off and flooded the fourth floor....

**R.I.P.** Lou Stathis (1952-1997) died in May, aged 44, following chemotherapy and surgery for brain tumours. Best known as an editor of DC Comics' upmarket Vertigo line, he'd been active in 70s sf fandom, worked for Dell, freelanced as a rock journalist, and had editorial posts on numerous magazines – including *Amazing*, *Fantastic*, *Heavy Metal*, *High Times* and *Reflex*.

**Thog's True UFO Masterclass.** A correspondent of greater intrepidity than sense has actually read Dr Courtney Brown's *Cosmic Voyage* (Hodder, 1997). p6: "This is a book of fact, not fiction." p74: "Martian society experienced some major catastrophe. Many Martians died and some were rescued ... The rescuers were the beings we now know as Greys." p138: "During the two years I conducted the research for this book, I was often struck by the similarities between many of the ideas that were presented in the show *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and the data obtained about real ET activities through remote viewing. [...] My goal was to learn whether ETs were somehow manipulating the minds of the writers so that they would come up with ideas for the show." [Guess what? They were!] p148: "I began by asking Jesus again if he wanted us [humans] to work with the Greys regarding their genetics project. [...] He categorically stated that we must work with them. They are God's children, no less valuable than those we call human. I asked him if the Grey project had something to do with a greater evolutionary goal, like merging with God in some way. He responded in the affirmative." p190: "I was resting on my bed, still somewhat bilocated, and I got the impression that it will be the Martians and the Greys who will teach us how to live underground. But the Martians will be the ones who actually live with us, holding our hands...." And the ultimate, stupefyingly cosmic revelation: "I knew then who had brought me to the Greys. The voice said, 'These are the beings whom you want to help.' It was the voice of my Aunt Elsie."



# The P. Grass Princess

Gwyneth Jones

**I**t was April, and down in the orchard the first flashing blades of the new year's growth were pushing aside the old, worn, winter stuff. The sky was blue and very clear, but the wind was cold. So the nursemaids put the little princess down under an apple tree, wrapped in her shawls, and ran away to play tag under the twisted apple branches, to keep themselves warm. And that was when the grass took her. Why did it happen? Was it the magic-making of a distant sorcerer, offended by some slight the royal family had forgotten? If it was, nobody ever found out. Or did the grasses embrace her because they had found a sister, as new and fresh and innocent as they? Perhaps, as some authorities later claimed, it was the baby herself who made the magic.

"But never mind who did it!" stormed the king, pacing up and down beside the tree while the nursemaids wept in a huddle. "How do we get her free again? That's the question."

The green tendrils that were wound around her little body seemed as soft and fragile to the touch, as grass blades should. But they held the child in a grip stronger than steel wire. Every cutting edge that the royal household could think of was brought down to the orchard. They tried steel, stone, bronze, and even a knife of sharpened shell: a ritual object, relic of the old days when a king succeeded not by inheritance but by the sacred murder of his predecessor. They tried fire, they tried weed-killer... But when the king sent for his enchanted diamond-bladed broadsword and started to saw away, dangerously near to the child's throat; and the baby started to scream – the queen called a halt. She protested that if all they wanted was to get the baby loose from the grass, a couple of pounds of high explosive, strategically placed, would probably do the trick. At last they decided to dig up the whole patch of grass on which she was lying, and carry it back

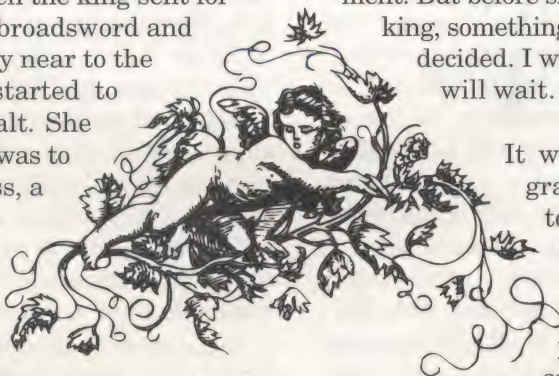
to the nursery; roots, dirt and all.

"Look at it this way," said the court magician. His spells had been helpless, and his nerves were all on edge. "You're not so much losing a daughter, as gaining a window box."

The infant had a little peace then, while messages were sent out, chasing up magical practitioners from all the lands around. She slept, and woke and slept again. She did not cry. She did not want to be fed. She smiled and slept and woke, and the grass blades twined ever closer and thicker around her tiny limbs, until only her face and one hand remained visible. A day and a night passed. On the third day the princess, who till then had kept up her usual baby-cooing and babbling, grew very quiet. Her mother, who was watching, saw a change come over that small familiar face. "She looks so sad," thought the queen, and leaned closer, so that the grass blades fluttered in her breath. She put out a finger to touch the baby's hand... Was it possible? Was the grip of those determined tendrils getting weaker? Yes, it was true. The springy green coils were relaxing; the brilliant sheen of life was fading from them...

The queen got slowly to her feet. She said aloud, as if the grass was a human enemy and could be deceived, "I think I will call the maid, and go downstairs. Baby is so quiet." She crept out of the room, and rushed down the stairs in a swirl of skirts, biting her fists in excitement. But before she could call for the servants or the king, something stopped her. I will tell no one, she decided. I will not hope, I will not be excited. I will wait...

It was terrible to wait, because the grass might be growing weaker just to grow stronger again in a little while. Perhaps she was missing her last chance to free the child. But the queen thought of how you might lift and tug and tear – and have in your arms a baby bleed-





ing from ten thousand wounds. The queen did not believe in the "malign sorcerer" for whom all the king's men were hunting. She was afraid of the grass itself. It was alive, it had if not a mind then at least a will of its own. It had taken her baby, for its own inscrutable reasons: and it would not willingly let her go.

She said nothing. No one else noticed that the grass was fading. In the middle of the night she came into the nursery very quietly. The nurse was drowsing in her chair. What of the child? From the cradle came the very faintest of sounds, a breath of a sigh. The queen looked down at her baby. Uprooted, shut away from the sunlight and the air; in spite of the earth that had been carried with it, the grass was withering. Already the blades were turning yellow and wan, like something grown in darkness under a stone. The princess lay still. Her eyes were open. She looked up at her mother, patiently: quietly accepting the suffering that was marked on her face, with no more outcry than the grass itself... which was also dying.

The queen saw that it was too late. Whatever made the baby a separate being, separate from the tendrils that bound her, was lost. She was the grass. Uprooted, she would wilt and fail and die. The queen stooped and picked up the whole bundle in her arms. She was so blinded by tears that she stumbled and several times almost fell as she hurried down the stairs, through the great still, dark rooms of the palace and across the gardens; to the apple orchard. There, standing out dark in the moonlight, was the small ragged trench where the turf had been cut away. The queen knelt beside it. She looked down into the pale dreaming face of her lost daughter. There was no longer the faintest hint of recognition in the princess's open eyes; or of any human expression. She put the bundle into the hole, and scratched and worked the soil until she had done all she could to make the plot whole again. Then she went to the gardener's potting shed and came back with a can of water. It was as she sprinkled water indiscriminately over baby and grass and earth, that she understood the full strength of the enchantment. For the baby stirred, and started to laugh. Looking up through the moonlit drops, she smiled as if she was greeting her mother. But it was obvious that she did not see the queen at all. As surely as Persephone, overtaken in the flowery fields of Sicily by the king of the dead, this child had been kidnapped by the powers of the earth. She was gone, she had been stolen out of the human world... maybe forever.

It was a tough fight, but in the end they let the queen have her way. The king thought the whole thing made him look a fool. Within hours, the conjurors and the alchemists and the amateur heroes would be pouring into the palace grounds, eager to do battle against this wicked spell. Now the queen wanted him to cancel everything, and let well alone. The king said he couldn't see anything "well" about it. He had a six-month-old daughter staked out like a cucumber vine in his backyard, and how could it possibly make sense to leave a situation like that undisturbed? Luckily for the queen, the bulk of magical opinion soon came over onto her side. The professionals felt that the kind of power that would be needed to break the bond between grass and

baby, would certainly break the baby too. The theory that the baby herself had done it appeared, and quickly gained ground. They decided it must be necessary for the princess to be enchanted like this, so that some prince (whose identity would emerge in time) could fulfil his destiny by freeing her. "Wait until she's older –" was the general run of advice. "Let Nature take its course." The queen found that these wise counsellors were reluctant to look her in the eye, as they took their fees. She felt that she understood their message only too well. But the king was satisfied.

The first thing he did, when he had been forced to wind up his rescue operation, was to assemble a team of architects, and get them designing the daintiest little summer-house, an orchard palace to be built around the enchanted apple tree... The queen was very sorry to do it, but she had to stop him again. She knew the poor man was doing his best, and that his rather inarticulate nature found relief in action, even the most futile action. But she also knew that his dainty arbour would kill her daughter. The baby's nature was one with the grass, and neither wind nor rain nor snow nor frost must be taken from her. She must live the life of the earth to which she was bound, or no life at all.

"What do you want me to do?" cried the king. "Go down there and tramp on her?"

"Of course not," replied the queen. "It would upset you horribly to do that. But she wouldn't mind, not if you trampled her into mud. She'd be back, as soon as you gave her a chance. That's what you must understand. She is the grass. Oh, I hope you'll be ready –"

"Ready for what?"

"When winter comes."

Winter came, and under the apple tree the child sickened and faded, as the queen knew she must. The king bore it very well, except for one frosty day when he was caught creeping down to the orchard, unrolling an extension lead behind him; an old one-bar electric fire hidden under his robe. But the queen's persistence was rewarded in the spring, when the child bloomed like the loveliest of April days. All through the summer she was well and strong, all through the winter she faded: and so it went on, through many winters and many springs. As well as thriving and failing with the changes of the season, the princess grew with real human growth, from a baby into a girl. The grass grew with her, so that her lengthening limbs made a green girl-shaped mound under the tree – a kind of horizontal topiary. Though she never spoke, and grew entirely silent before she was a year old, her eyes were alive. They opened to the daylight, closed at night; and seemed to smile at sun and rain. Some people said she was lovely – as far as you could see. Then, just as the girl in the orchard reached "marriageable age," the queen died. She was still young. But she had spent so many hours sitting out under that apple tree, in all weathers – and perhaps she wasn't very strong to begin with: anyway, she died. It happened suddenly. A cold turned in a day or two into fever and inflammation of the lungs. The queen hardly knew she was ill, before she found herself on her death bed, comforting her weeping husband.

"Don't be sad. My daughter has taught me. I am not afraid to lie down in the earth. I believe she is happy,



maybe happier than any of us. But my dear..."

Afterwards, the king had a sneaking conviction that if she had managed to talk any more, she would have forced him to promise to leave their daughter in peace. But luckily she didn't. So, after a decent interval, he began his preparations.

The court physician was called to a consultation in the orchard, with the king, the court magician and a crowd of other functionaries. He gave the grass princess as thorough an examination as was possible, and told her father, looking very grave, that even if she was released there was little chance that his daughter could ever "live a normal life."

"And if one of these heroes of yours could somehow free her," said the great man. "Would he want her? Have you considered that she must be horribly scarred?"

"But it is *magic*," protested the king. "When the spell is broken, everything will be fine."

"There are some enchantments," declared the physician, "that aren't worth breaking."

But the court magician supported the king. Years of doing nothing, about a bad magical situation on his own patch, had galled his pride. He had always secretly resented the queen's triumph, and he and the physician were old rivals. He saw the grass princess problem as opportunity – not for himself, of course, but for the prestige of his discipline.

He sighed – a wise and reluctant sigh that put the blame for anything that went wrong firmly on his master's shoulders. "I don't think it is possible," he declared, "for us to accept the advice of medical science. Though we take these considerations seriously, we have here to do with a matter of destiny – a concept that 'medical science' cannot, with all due respect, fully understand. By my art, I have learned that the princess must and will be freed... *by one bound as she is bound, and scarred as she is scarred...*"

"What?" spluttered the king. He stared at the magician accusingly. He had thought the two of them were agreed. There was nothing really wrong with the princess, no reason why she should not make a complete recovery –

"Ah –" The sage blinked. He had not meant to say that. Sometimes these things happened to him. It was one of the disadvantages of his profession. Just occasionally, one was not altogether in control. He corrected himself hurriedly. "Metaphorically speaking, that is. Bound and scarred as – er – a metaphor for the heroic experience."

The physician snorted. "I thought we were concerned about the girl, not the 'destiny' of some unknown youth. Well, I wash my hands of the whole affair." He stalked off, and the consultation was over. Magic had won the day.

Alas, it seemed that the doctor's pessimistic estimate was shared by the eligible young princes and nobles around about. There were ten or twenty young men who should have been the princess's suitors – some rich and handsome, some not so rich or not so handsome, all of them eager to make a good marriage. But they were not interested in the mound of grass in the king's

orchard. The king became uncomfortably aware that his daughter had become a joke amongst his neighbours' sons. If you suggested to anyone that he should try his hand at "the grass princess job," it meant you considered his prospects to be in very poor shape indeed.

There came a grey cold day in November, two years after the death of the queen. Under the old apple tree, the princess lay wan and haggard and worn. The shape of her in the grass didn't change with the seasons now that she was grown: but in winter her face, what you could see of it, looked like that of a sick little old woman. It was her birthday, she was 18 years old. A young man rode into the gardens, dressed for hunting. His name was Damien. He was the same age as the princess – a rather dishevelled young man, with a look of angry unconcern. He had come dressed up for this quest, his manner seemed to say, but that didn't mean he took it seriously. He left his horse and came down between the trees. He had been sent here from the palace office, but he surveyed the scene in bewilderment. There was something distinctly macabre going on. Two middle-aged noblemen and a pack of servants were cavorting around the dead body of an old woman... who appeared to have been long buried, except that her face and one withered hand had been dug up. Somebody was tying balloons in the branches above this half-exhumed corpse –

"Excuse me. Can you direct me to –"

They didn't hear him. The whole crew had suddenly burst out singing: "Happy Birthday to you! Happy birthday to you!" Suddenly the prince realized where he was and what he was seeing. He had not imagined it would be like this. Evil enchantment had a distant, romantic sound... He decided to leave, quietly.

"Hey!" yelled one of the middle-aged men. "Hey – you there, wait!"

He recognized the king. The other gentleman must be the court magician. The king was a friend of the prince's family. He couldn't escape now. He bowed, awkwardly. "Hail sire. I have come, if you will permit me, to attempt to free your daughter from foul enchantment, and thereby win her hand in marriage."

No one spoke. A manservant who was holding a pink iced cake on a tray, coughed. The princess's nursemaids gaped at him, making him feel extremely self-conscious. Damien, who had few friends and was oblivious to gossip, did not know that he was the only suitor who had taken up the king's well-publicized offer. He was unnerved by this reaction.

"So, what do I do? Do I kiss her, or what?"

He saw that there was something else showing besides a withered face. The princess's hand lay by her grass-grown side. The fingers were bare, they looked like thin and sallow grass roots. He guessed he must take her hand. The king and the magician were still staring, as if affronted by his presence. He stepped forward and went on one knee...

"No, no, no –"

One of the servants was pulling him to his feet. The two older men moved, making a barrier between the grass princess and her suitor. They were dressed identically, in sober suits under dark court robes. Their eyes



were smug and old. He didn't even want the princess: but there they stood, age and authority incarnate, between Damien and all the world's prizes...

"I see," he said angrily. "I'm not good enough. Fine. I'll be on my way."

"Ah –" The king suddenly produced a smile. "Not so, ah, not so fast, young man. You see there are certain – ahem – requirements. You can't expect to win the hand of an enchanted princess just like that!" He laughed lightly. "You'd better come to my magician's office."

The magician had devised a list of tasks. He had spent time on this, and performed several magical operations, in his dark tower away in the remote fastness of the West Wing. He was proud of his list. He felt that it reflected the importance of the grass princess affair, in the annals of magic: and that the success of the hero would also, and rightly, be the crowning achievement of his own career. Prince Damien studied the list of magical treasures that he had to secure – beg, borrow or steal – while the king and the magician explained to him how he would be welcomed, when he'd completed his tasks. There would be a newly devised and very impressive ceremony. He would be escorted in state to the orchard, where he would take the princess by the hand – and she would rise from the grass, a beautiful maiden, ready to be his bride. He must, of course, agree to complete confidentiality. No interviews, no publications except with the express permission of the palace Office of Magic.

Damien wasn't paying attention. The first item he had to deliver was the silver sword of the Divine Huntress. His spirits rose. He signed everything they put in front of him. There were handshakes all round. The king and the magician returned to the birthday party and Damien rode away, full of hope and determination.

"Unfortunate case," said the king, when the boy was gone. "Young Damien. The mother ran off, you know, back to her own people under the hill. But the son's completely human. One of those things – genetics, they call it, I believe: it can play tricks. So he ended up with his father, who married again. There's a pack of new kiddies, new wife can't stand the boy of course, and his father is doing his best to fix the succession. It would be a funny thing if he – well, you know. I had a soft spot for his mother... but that was long ago."

The magician nodded thoughtfully, but his eyes gleamed. "Fairy blood!" he remarked. "Things are falling out very well for me... Ah, for the princess, I meant, of course."

Damien knew exactly what to do. The Divine Huntress is another name for the goddess of the moon. The silver sword would have to be a moonbeam. For any other young prince or sprig of the nobility, the first task might have been impossible. Moonbeams tend to slip through one's fingers: and it was clear that the "sword" had to be a functional weapon. For once his mixed race was going to be an advantage. His mother had lost interest in him, the way those people tend to lose interest in fleeting human affairs. But he still had friends (as far as those people can be called friends), under the hill. He rode straight away to Wild Swan lake, where his mother and his father had first met, one midsummer

dusk long ago. There, on a night of the full moon, he tapped on a certain door (invisible to wholly human eyes) in the hillside that rises from that lake shore. He was not allowed beyond the threshold. He would never be allowed beyond, unless he consented to give up his humanity: but he spoke to someone there. The first price demanded was a strip of skin the whole length of him, but he beat the fairy haggler down. He gave up a strip of skin from around his wrist, and didn't ask – he thought he'd rather not ask – what it was for. In return he was given a black, polished tree-root shaped like the hilt of a sword; and a long sheath of birch bark, sewn with spider thread. Then he knelt at the water margin and touched the hilt to one glimmering silver ripple, that slipped into the bark sheath as if they'd been made for each other.

He returned to the palace a month after he'd set out. His wrist was painful, and there'd be a scar there for life, but he was feeling confident. The king and the magician received him in strict privacy. In the West Wing, in the magician's comfortable study on the floor below his magical laboratory, they dimmed the lights. The magician took the fairy sheath and, slowly, drew out the sword of the Divine Huntress. The bright scalloped blade shone like silver. He laughed in delight. "Excellent! A triumph of my art –!"

"Well done!" said the king.

Damien noted that somehow his achievement had become the old conjuror's "triumph." But it didn't matter. He had questing-fever now. He set out at once for the uttermost ocean, where he was to mine the yellow foam for a bushel of mer-gold. This transaction was not so simple. The Smith of the Uttermost Ocean lived in the galleries of a great cavern of green serpentine, that was half-filled by the tide twice a day, and only visited by one questing hero or so in a generation. He was a lonely and embittered minor divinity, and he insisted that Damien had to work for his gold, as well as pay for it. The Smith knew how to distil many precious and useful ores from the sea. He was an exacting taskmaster and he treated Damien like an apprentice. Damien spent two years in the damp, snakestone gloom, the roar of the waves a constant booming in his ears: learning more than he had ever desired to know about the trade of smithying and the inner nature of metals. Time and again, he thought he'd completed his task: and then the Smith, who complained that the terms of the engagement were vague, changed his mind as to what quantity of gold constituted "a bushel." But at last, he managed to escape with his prize.

When the magician's security guards escorted him once more to the sage's study, he could see that the king and the magician didn't recognize him. He himself didn't recognize the room. It seemed larger, and everything looked shiny. He limped across to the magician's huge desk, and dumped his burden. "That's a bushel," he said. "The equivalent of eight gallons of sea-foam gold, dry measure. It may seem like less, but I got the Smith to sign for it."

They were looking at him strangely. "Are you hurt?" asked the king.

"Not exactly. It was the price of the gold. One hamstring tendon: the Smith needed it to mend his bellows, he's lost both his own hamstrings, as you know."



The magician opened the seaweed sack. A greenish glow oozed out. He dipped in his hand. The magic gold-dust slithered over his palm. "Beautiful," he murmured. "And all mine!"

Damien could still hear the sea rushing and roaring in his ears. It was as if an endless earthquake had taken up residence in his head.

"Very good," declared the king. "Very good... You are doing a good quest, my fine fellow. And now, I believe it's the Lost Helmet of Invisibility."

So Damien set off in search of the Helm. He thought of going home to visit his family first, but decided against it. His oldest step-brother was now crown prince, and Damien's presence would only open old wounds. Besides, he had questing-fever.

It took years, this time. The Helm had been lost for over 500 years. Before he even began to look for it he had to learn how to search: in old libraries and record offices, in museums and monasteries. He had to work to support himself as well. Since the crisis over the succession had been weathered, it was a lot more difficult getting money out of his father. Sometimes he thought of the princess. He saw in his mind's eye that pallid hand, and wondered what it would feel like to touch it. He wondered what they would talk about, when he was king and she was queen. But the achievement was more important than the reward. When he finally returned to that orchard and freed the famous "grass princess" from her bondage (she was famous now: the court magician had made sure of that) he would have *done something with his life*, and nobody would be able to deny it.

Damien discovered that around the time when the Helm disappeared a certain giant called Lamerish of the Craggs, had been a prominent social figure. He had been much more socialized than the average giant: in fact he was a noted art collector. There had been rumours. But no one could prove – or dared to try – that he had a secret collection of stolen treasures, besides those that he kept on open display. The Helm of Invisibility had disappeared, from the treasury of a royal family that was now extinct. Lamerish the giant, Damien learned, seemed to have vanished from history at about the same time. The first part of the search ended when Damien established that a small craggy piece of a neighbouring kingdom's highest mountain range, had also vanished from modern maps.

He knew that the only way to reach a place made invisible by magic, was to travel there through fairyland. So he went again to the door in the hillside – a different hillside from the one above Wild Swan Lake; but the same entrance, to the same forbidden realm. The guardian of the threshold could have been the same as the person with whom he'd bargained for a moonbeam swordblade. Damien couldn't tell. One doesn't see those people clearly. In this world, they are a trick of the light. He saw the shadow of leaves moving, a glint of sunlight eyes; a hint of dappled animal limbs... He was told that the price of his journey to the Invisible Crag, would be that he would not be able to find the door in the hill again. He would be earthbound, forever. Damien accepted the bargain. Something touched his eyes lightly. He saw and felt nothing until he found himself

standing knee deep in alpine snow, a terrifying desolation of rock and ice and snow rearing up around him.

He climbed to the giant's castle. No one challenged him. He passed through the fallen gates, through snowdrifts to the great doors of the keep, where human and giant-sized men-at-arms were still standing, frozen and mummified, upright in their corroded armour. The giant must have stolen the Helm, or had it stolen; used it to hide his castle, and then discovered too late that he could not undo what he had done. Obviously he wasn't a student of magic, or he would have known that the Helm was protected. Any thief who used it would find he couldn't take it off again, and couldn't return himself or anything he had rendered invisible, to the visible world.

Damien walked into the great hall, through ranks of priceless, mouldering artworks. The giant Lamerish was sitting there alone, in a huge bronze chair that once had belonged to an Emperor: facing the doorway, with dark, unseeing eyes. He must have died, along with all his people, of hunger and thirst. The Helm was like a closed crown, the bands of magic metal set with dim grey jewels. Damien lifted it from the giant's yellowed skull, being careful not to touch it with his bare hands. He wrapped it in his spare shirt.

The crag had returned to the real world, as soon as Damien took the Helm from the skull. He set off to make the long descent. He'd been prepared, but conditions above the snowline were worse that season than he had imagined possible. By the time he reached safety, his hands and face and feet were ravaged by frostbite. It was months before he was fit to travel back to the palace.

The magician was ecstatic. He positively drooled over the Helm. The king was excited too. He kept repeating: "Well done, well done, very good work!" – and patting his hands over his plump belly, as he sat in comfort in the magician's splendid audience chamber. They were both looking extremely prosperous, as was the whole palace.

Damien just felt terribly tired. But some profound emotion began to stir as he watched the two self-satisfied old men.

"I'd like to see the princess again now."

"Eh? See the princess?" The king, bemused by this suggestion, looked to the sage for guidance. The magician discreetly pursed his lips and frowned. "I'm afraid that's impossible," declared the king. "You see, my boy, you haven't completed the tasks –"

Damien set his teeth, and clenched his scarred fists. "I'd like to see the princess."

To avoid a scene, they took him to the orchard, accompanied by the minimum security escort. Nothing had changed much there. The rest of the palace was full of people these days, bustling about the business of the "grass princess affair." But the magician had wisely realized that the enchanted princess was not, in herself, an impressive object. It was better that she remained a mystery, unvisited and secret.

It was September and the grass had been allowed to grow rich and long. It had gone to seed in plumes of russet and gold. There was a humming of insects in the sultry afternoon air. A few red apples glowed between



the leaves of the old tree, a single ageing nursemaid jumped up from her chair and curtsied.

The king and the magician had to wait for Damien to catch up. He limped towards them, flanked by guards, and stared down at that blurred hummock in the long grass: the weather-browned leaf-shape of her face, the sallow root-fingers of her uncovered hand. He remembered the scene he'd imagined: the delicate hand waiting for his touch, the sweet face looking up like a fallen star...

A rush of bitterness overwhelmed him. He saw what the grass princess was. *She was bait in a trap.* She was the bait those two gloating, fatherly monsters had used, to lure Damien into their service. They had taken the treasures. They had taken his strength, his youth, his time, his birthright... And for nothing. Because suddenly he knew that he would never win. That hump in the grass would never stand up, a human girl. He'd been so naive! It was obvious to him now that the magician hadn't the slightest idea how the "enchantment" could be broken. The list of tasks was pure, greedy invention.

"Damn you!" he yelled. "You old bloodsuckers! Liars! Thieves!"

The guards reacted quickly. But they didn't know how much force they should use. After all, Damien was supposed to be the hero, of the story that was keeping everyone in business. The prince, lame and weary as he was, shook off their restraining hands. He flung himself on the grass. He got hold of the hand. It didn't respond: it was inanimate as earth. He dropped it and started tugging and tearing, sobbing furiously –

"Cheats! I gave you my life! For this thing, this scrap of dirt –"

The guards dragged him off, prising loose his twisted fingers. The king was shaking his head sadly, the magician looked wise and pained.

"That won't do, you know," said the king mildly. "You can't force her."

Damien stared at them. The grass cuts on his hands were stinging. "I've finished," he said heavily. "You can keep your quest." He kept on looking back, staring with the same dull anger, as he stumbled away. The magician made a sign that the guards were to let him go.

"Most regrettable," he remarked. "Very shocking."

"What a shame. And he had only one task left to perform. What was it, by the way?"

"Bring peace to the House of Ayi," supplied the magician. He shrugged. "Something for the good of the community. A social service, you might say. There's no treasure involved. I put it in," he added, in a lapse of unusual candour, "because I felt otherwise our requirements might seem a little, well, acquisitive – to ignorant opinion."

"Any chance that he might perform it? And come back?"

The two prosperous gentlemen glanced at each other, with almost a sly look. Secretly, the king was well aware that the quest was bogus, and that if a hero managed to fulfil their conditions, they'd have to start thinking of new excuses for why the enchantment remained unbroken... The magician knew that the king understood this.

"Very little," he assured his master. "No chance at all,

I'd say." With a nod to the nursemaid, they turned to leave the orchard. "Well, Damien has failed," went on the magician. "We must seek a new champion. There will be plenty of candidates, there's been a great deal of interest building up." He rubbed his hands in anticipation. "I must compose a new list."

Damien left the orchard where the grass princess lay dreaming far behind him. He decided to take up the usual career of a disinherited prince, and become a mercenary soldier. He was strong, from the years at the smithy, and he still had the remains of his early training in his father's castle. But he was lame and scarred, and he couldn't raise his own troop or even equip himself well. He wandered for months through the neighbouring kingdoms, without finding employment. At last he came to a country where warfare had become a way of life. The farmlands were devastated, the people were starving. The cities were battered fortresses, struggling along from one siege-and-burning to the next...

Damien rode into this blighted land at the beginning of winter. He couldn't locate the armies, but one day as he was riding through the desolate fields, a woman stepped out in the road in front of him, and took hold of his horse's bridle. She was dark-skinned, like many of the people of this country. She was dressed in ragged leather, unarmed as far as he could see, and had a bloodstained rag tied round one shoulder. She wore gold braided in her wiry hair, and gold rings on her fingers. It was dusk: the gold and her eyes and teeth shone like life in the gloom.

"That's a fine horse," she said.

The mare was not a fine horse. But Damien looked at the woman – brigand, beggar or soldier, it was all the same in this country – and he loved her. He knew from the way she looked up at him, that she felt the same sudden flame. "Who are you?" he said.

"I am a queen, but at this moment a beggar-queen. Will you help me?"

"And I'm a general," laughed Damien. "Get up behind, I can give you a lift."

The beggar queen thanked him, got up behind and directed him across the fields, past the gibbets where the dead hung in chains, through a burned village: to an armed camp. When she slipped to the ground, at the first guard post, uproar burst out. Damien learned that he had met a genuine queen: Nanya the Black, who had been captured by the Duke, her brother, and had escaped as he found her – alone and unarmed.

So the prince joined Nanya's army. He never became a general, but before long he became her lover. The other officers, a desperate crew of cut-throats, called him Hob because of his limp, and they didn't resent his privileges. Nanya the Black was a tigress, too hot for any but this brave fool of a stranger. Damien heard her story, partly from Nanya herself and partly from one of her real generals, a grizzled old soldier called Camiero Goodwill. There had been war for generations, between the Black Ayi and the White. The Black Ayi were indeed often black-skinned, but that wasn't how they got their name. They were devils, declared Camiero with pride. Nanya and Ester of Ayi, when they were very young, had ruthlessly destroyed the Whites and briefly pulled the whole country together. They were



brother and sister, and lovers too, as was the custom. Then the Emperor – a foreigner, explained Camiero, who for some unfathomable reason imagined he owned Ayi – interfered. He made Ester a Duke, with legal title to the whole domain, on condition that he marry his “White” cousin, a child who had been taken off and reared abroad (which was how she came to be still alive). The Emperor didn’t know or care about local customs.

“Nenya bided her time,” explained Camiero. “Until the White arrived. She nearly cut the little girl’s throat, and then we’d have had peace. But we were betrayed. That traitor Ester turned the army against us and threw us out, Nenya and her whole train – I was with the queen then already, you see. So she raised her own army, and the war began again.”

The story was told differently in the countries where Damien had been a prince and a questing-hero. But he accepted the new version, in which a blood-feud made sense and Black Nenya was in the right. He forgot his old life almost entirely. Sometimes on the edge of sleep, he would remember the grass princess, and wonder if she would ever find a hero... scarred as she was scarred, bound as she was bound. He knew the famous words now, though he hadn’t heard them before he started the quest. The magician hadn’t been able to prevent them from passing into popular mythology. But it was not his problem any more.

One day – it was the end of another winter – Nenya took him out onto a tawny, snow-stained mountainside, to a ridge that overlooked a wide view of rolling hills. Things had been going well for the queen. She was about to begin her great attack on Ayi itself. It was a fine morning; they were on horseback.

“Do you see those towers?” she said. “The four great towers against the sky? That’s the castle of Ayi, where I was born. I will never rest, until I am back within those walls.”

She did not look at Damien. But he looked at her, and he was consumed with jealousy, and hatred for the Duke of Ayi. After that day the lovers began to quarrel. Camiero and the other officers – men and women both, because in Ayi Nenya was not the only tigress – looked on and shrugged and didn’t try to intervene. They’d seen this happen before. Damien was jealous, and Nenya scornful. Damien demanded proof of her love, Nenya told him he was a common soldier, and she owed him nothing. He still shared her bed. Her passion there grew savage, as her forces closed in on Ayi. But Damien knew that it was the Duke’s face she saw in the dark, her traitor brother’s body she embraced.

They were preparing to attack an armed supply train. It was a minor part of Nenya’s plan, this ambush in a pass called the Scartaran Defile, but she was leading it herself. Damien had been sent off, with jeers from the queen, to guard the spare horses. He decided that this was his chance to tackle Nenya alone. He left the horses and sneaked around the lines of ragged soldiers, hidden in the boulders and the long brown thickets of winter grass, to where Nenya was sitting by herself a little way off from her officers; as always before a fight.

“Nenya,” he whispered. “We have to talk –”

“No.” She jumped up and turned on him, a long knife in each hand. “I have made up my mind. I’m going to

kill you. It will be your release, poor fool.”

So they fought. But it was Nenya the Black who fell, her life choking out of her.

Without Nenya, the ambush became a rout. And it was that day, after the battle, that the Duke Ester killed himself, on learning of his sister’s death. It was that same day, as Nenya lay in the castle courtyard on a wooden trestle, at rest within the walls of Ayi, that the Duke’s young wife came down – looking like a child before the crowd of war-hardened savages – with her baby in her arms: and spoke to the people, saying that the lovers should be buried in one grave; and from now on there would be peace.

Damien was there, through these great events. He found that he was somehow counted responsible for ending the feud. He said all he wanted was to go home. So the Duke’s wife gave him money and a fine horse, and set him on his way. Some time later, maybe days or maybe hours, he found himself on a road somewhere, got down from the horse and ran into a wood. He was looking for the door into fairyland. He could not find it. He ran wildly into a thicket of thorns, and struggled there until he fell, bleeding from ten thousand wounds.

When he woke up, he couldn’t see. He heard the pad of bare feet, and felt someone was bending over him. “You’re awake,” said an old, kindly voice. “That’s good. I am the Hermit of the Borderland. I found you hurt in the wood and brought you to my home. Don’t be afraid, you will not be blinded for long.”

Damien touched his own face, with his scarred fingertips. “What’s this?”

“A compress of bruised herbs. It’s a kind of wild grass. It will speed the healing.”

The prince lay and thought about that. “Grass,” he repeated. “It smells of earth.” He sighed. “I have to make a journey. One more journey.”

“In a few days.”

“No. At once.”

So they set out.

In the apple orchard it was April again, with a wind like ice and the sun like honey. The princess who lay bound in the grass was blossoming like the trees. The nursemaid, who had once been a blossoming girl herself, playing tag in the chilly sunshine, talked to the princess quietly, while she did her knitting. She liked to talk, and no one could prove that the grass princess didn’t hear you, even if she never answered.

The Hermit led Damien, his eyes still bound. The prince heard a comfortable murmuring voice, that broke off suddenly.

“Am I in the orchard?”

“Yes, sir,” said the nurse.

“The king? Is he here? The magician?”

“Oh no, they’ve all gone, I’m sorry sir. The king is on his holidays, in the Fortunate Isles. And the magician... if you mean the old one, he left us a while ago. You see, we didn’t attract the right kind of hero, after prince Damien failed. And our sage had a very good offer from a big... ‘multinational,’ I think they call them. So we’re very quiet here now. The palace is mostly shut up. Should I show you to the reception office?”

“No, thank you.”



Damien sat down. His hands brushed the young grass. He could not tell if it was warmer where it covered what had once been the body of a girl, he could feel no pulse of separate life. He groped, and found her hand. It lay in his for a moment, like a twist of dry grass. Then the world shivered, and changed. Warm fingers grasped his. The princess stirred, sat up, and stood; drawing Damien to his feet.

"Who are you?"

Damien let go her hand and pulled the grass from his eyes. The princess was standing there, clothed in the rags of a baby shawl, and her tumbling dark hair: a strong, shapely young woman, with no visible scar from her long imprisonment.

"A friend," he said. "Just a friend."

The nursemaid ran and fetched the clothes, the set of clothes that was traditionally kept ready. The Hermit told the new young woman what she must do to give thanks for her deliverance. Soon she was dressed. She returned to the stranger, looking shy and solemn.

"They tell me you broke the enchantment. And that means... I belong to you?"

He shook his head. He thought of his bitter experience, his long trials, his guilt and shame. He was stricken, scarred and bound. He had nothing to say to this stainless creature. How could she possibly understand?

"No. You don't belong to anyone. Walk away, princess. Forget what happened here. Be your own woman."

So the princess walked away. But when she came to the orchard gate she stopped. She turned, and came back. Damien saw that the scars were there, after all. He saw the misery and frustration of her bondage, the silent courage and endurance, all the voiceless suffering of the years, looking out of eyes that mirrored his own.

"This isn't the end of the story," she said. "It is the beginning. Be my friend."



Gwyneth Jones's previous stories in *Interzone* were "Gravegoods" (issue 31), "Forward Echoes" (issue 42) and "Blue Clay Blues" (issue 62). She has also contributed many book reviews. The above story, which first appeared in her small-press book *Seven Tales and a Fable* (Edgewood Press, 1995), won the World Fantasy Award. As it has not been reprinted since, and has been seen by few British readers, we decided to present it here.

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# The Committed Man

*M. John Harrison*  
talks to Nicholas Royle



“He once bought a three-litre Capri with immense back wheels. To no purpose. Somebody had put these immense back wheels on it. God knows why, because every time he went over a bump they ground on the wheel arches, slowing the car down. But it went fast anyway.”

M. John Harrison may have saved Loz Francombe's life, but it's Francombe who's one of Harrison's heroes. He became an exemplar for a type of fictional character Harrison would create years later and use in *Climbers* (1989) and *Signs of Life*, published recently by Victor Gollancz.

“He took some acid one day and lots of other things and we went racketing down some road in the Peak District. We were going as fast as it would go – I can't remember how fast that was, certainly over 100 miles an hour, 120, 130, down a one-lane road, no room for cars to pass, through a forest, early in the morning with mist coming out of the conifers, the larches and the spruces, and the wonderful sunlight boiling down over it, early summer, late spring, bracken just uncurled. Totally perfect morning. He kept saying, ‘It's just so fucking perfect.’ Suddenly he stopped in about 100 yards, from 120 miles an hour to absolute zero, till I was, like, hung in front of the windscreen from the seatbelt going ‘What the fuck, what the fuck, why did you do that?’ And he just pointed out of the windscreen at a butterfly fluttering about in the road. He said, ‘I couldn't have run into that.’ It was only at that point I realized how many drugs he'd taken and what they were likely to have been.”

Loz Francombe was 15 when Harrison first met him. His brothers were about to drive the family car over him, crushing his head and legs, because Loz had decided he wanted to become a stuntman and he thought stuntmen actually did all the things that appear to happen to them in the movies. So he was getting some practice in. If Harrison hadn't stopped the car from rolling forward, the kid would never even have hired another video. As it was, he learned to climb, and he had a good teacher. You talk to people who've learned the ropes from Harrison and they all agree – he's a good teacher.

And a committed climber, so it's cruelly ironic that Harrison should recently have developed a form of Ménière's syndrome, an inner-ear disorder. Climbing and vertigo are hardly an ideal combination.

Like all good teachers, however, he has respect for his pupils. Loz Francombe wasn't just a teenager with a death-wish. Like all the climbers Harrison hung out with, he was someone Harrison, the writer, could learn from as well.

“A bit later the same day, he's 100 feet up this cliff above a pool and he's put several runners in, so the rope is going through these runners. He's

got to the really hard part of the climb. I've seen this and I've been unable to get in touch with him because he's not listening: he's clipped his rope through his last two runners in such a way that, instead of flowing smoothly, every time it pulls, it tightens up harder and he can't get any further. And he's grunting and he's groaning and the more he hauls, the more this system ties him into the rock, until finally he falls off because he can't make the move and do the hauling. And as he falls off, a butterfly comes fluttering past, and he looks down and he says,

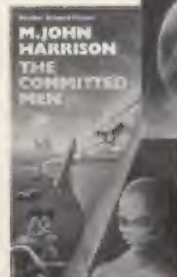
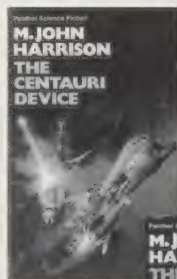
‘Mike, it's the same one.

What do you think of that. I mean, there's something in that, isn't there? That's the same butterfly.’ This man became a legend in his own time, not as a climber but as a steeplejack. He's a great hero, a fine, fine boy.”

*Signs of Life*, Harrison's eighth novel, is narrated by Mick “China” Rose. China

falls in love with Isobel, whom he meets at an aerodrome; she dreams of being able to fly. Their relationship is complicated by China's relationship with Choe, his partner in a courier business that specializes in shifting materials for the burgeoning European genetics industry. Before long, Rose Services are also moving biological waste, dumping it in the English countryside. Choe is a mercurial character, an awkward customer, unpredictable, uncompromising, as tricky to handle as a van-load of uranium 238.

He's not Loz Francombe, but there's a bit of Loz Francombe in him. “It would be unfair to anybody





that I knew to say that they were the largest part of any character," Harrison explains. "The whole thing has been, of course, fictionalized. I wouldn't want to say that Loz was Choe. I'd rather write about Loz. If I wrote about him then I would want to write directly about him, and one day I will."

There are writers who sit down at the typewriter one day and make stuff up. Characters, dialogue, plot. Out of thin air. Sometimes it shows.

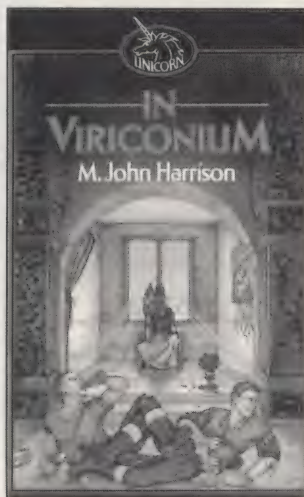
And there are writers who take their material from life. A little from here, a bit from there. A strand of autobiography, a twist of imagination. There's a passage in *Signs of Life* that describes in such thoroughly convincing and evocative detail what it's like to find yourself dumped, that the reader inevitably makes a connection between narrator and author. It may or may not be proper to do this, but when writing feels as personal as this, it does become inescapable. Any author even half-aware of the effect of his or her work knows this.

From the short stories that make up *The Ice Monkey*, through *Climbers*, to *The Course of the Heart* and *Signs of Life*, M. John Harrison's work has been characterized by a fusion of some kind of other-worldly element – whether it be the occult, the outright fantastical or the product of Harrison's own particular marriage of sf and surrealism – with psychologically convincing characters, deeply felt emotion and realistic dialogue. In *Climbers* especially, verisimilitude was established through dialogue.

"Much of it was got by writing very quickly. I would go into cafés. Places where I could appear to be making notes on a book, only I wouldn't be making notes on a book at all, because I would be taking down what people around me were saying. I spent three or four years doing that in the north. The major product of that was *Climbers*. But with the climbers themselves I would often just take it down in front of them once they'd got used to me. They didn't seem to mind. Nobody actually punched me out when the book was published. They all read it and they all recognized each other. They were able to take the piss out of one another without realizing that they'd missed themselves. People would say to me, how did you invent this incredibly realistic dialogue? And the answer is *don't invent it*. You know, the answer is get yourself some really good electronics, spend a lot of time on the tops of buses, in

cafés. Indeed, if you've got really good electronics, in people's front rooms – and get it down. But after that, you find that you can very rarely use it verbatim. You have to break it up and modify the rhythms for the thing that you actually want to write. You don't know, of course, if people know that you're doing it, how, as it were, realistic the dialogue you're getting is. With the climbers I knew, they were great raconteurs. I

knew they were performers. Part of climbing is bullshitting



about it afterwards.

They perform for one another very ably. If you were to ask me what is the most realistic part of Choe, it's that, it's that general ability to act himself in front of other people. What that says about his mental condition, what that says about you if you're good at that, I don't know.

"Everything that these guys do, they do it. They have an extraordinarily ironic interface with the way they describe the events of their own lives, the adventures that happen to them, which makes you aware even as they tell the story that somehow they're bullshitting even though they've done it. They've been to the top of Siula Grande and half way down they fell and broke their leg and it took them three days to crawl out, but there is something in the way that they narrate it which makes you aware that there's a truth

that they can't tell you about it – they can only present it as a piece of bullshit, that somehow there's a further truth behind that."

In a key sequence in *Signs of Life* Choe describes an occasion when he followed a girl off the bus into a patch of woodland. She had extraordinary eyes: "Every different green was in them." Choe relates a transcendental, life-changing experience which he has with the green-eyed girl. China – and the reader – wonder if it really happened at all. (*Interzone* readers will remember

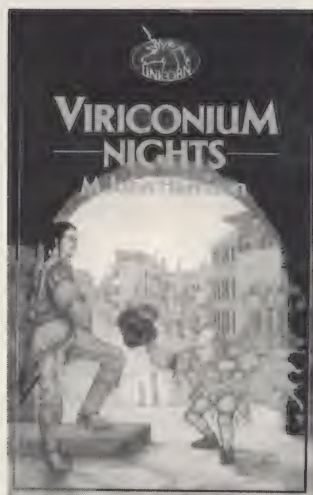
Harrison's short story, "Anima," in issue 58, which used this material before it became part of *Signs of Life*.)

"The green-eyed girl," Harrison explains, "is partly a metaphor for Choe's inability to tell the real truth about himself, because it's too real, it's too central to his own perception. It would wound him too much to pull it out. It would be like pulling your own heart out. What actually happens is at the end he twice denies it. What I wanted to do was leave a certain amount of doubt in the reader's mind about whether it had happened or not. But since the summing up has to come from China, who misunderstands Choe's complexity all the way through, it's a very difficult ending to try to pull off. I think there was a technical difficulty there for me, which consisted in trying to suggest that Choe was bullshitting to hide the truth, which was that it had actually happened."

Essentially *Signs of Life* is about three people

and their desires or dreams. China's love for Isobel, her dreams of flight, and Choe's desire to re-create the experience of the green-eyed girl.

"Let the world be more than it is," exclaims Harrison, sitting on the edge of his seat in the north London flat he shares with Iggy, a black-tipped burmilla cat. "People like Choe destroy themselves simply out of the need for the world to be more than it is. For me that's the most important thing about Choe and that's the part of my own character that both he and Isobel represent. That combination of bitterness and the tragedy you feel that the world can't be more than it is. I'm always thought of as a super-realist. Just the other day in a fanzine somebody described me as the kind of writer who had always tried to force the reader to face the facts about the





world. Somebody who would be considered as absolutely opposite to New Age. But you're only like that because part of you has been wounded when you were younger. And for me, that absolute intensity of feeling that Choe wants to experience is to do with somehow for a minute the world having more value than it's actually got, as it were, the world being more than it is. I experience a terrific need to be more than I am."

A desire for immortality, in other words?

"No. In a way I think it's quite the reverse. I would like to experience that amount of intensity for an incredibly short period of time and then die. I would like to know for a second before I die somehow that the world was bigger than I thought it was, that there was some intensity to the world which revealed itself just in an instant. I wouldn't know what kind of intensity it was. I wouldn't want to put a name to it anyway. But all my characters have mourned it. Certainly since

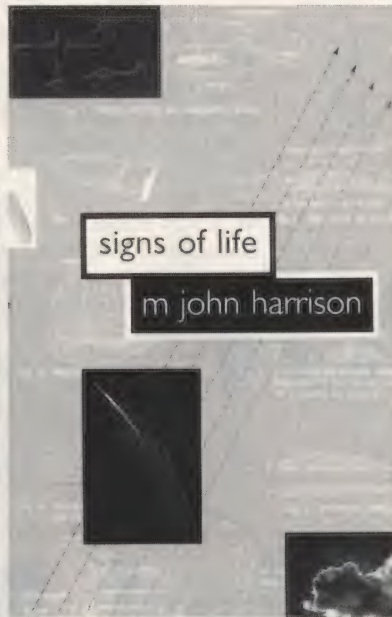
'Running Down.' Before that it was difficult for me to present characters who mourned it because it was too complex a thing for my technique to be able to say, but 'Running Down' was the first attempt at it, and 'The Ice Monkey' was the first successful attempt at showing somebody who desperately needed the world to be more than it was, and in the absence of that meaning found it impossible to continue, or meaningless to continue. Not that I personally do – I'm more like China than Choe. Many of the climbers I've met, that was the only way to explain them. It's nothing to do with a death wish, it's to do with wanting to burn a bit more intensely for a moment. And you certainly do. I mean, 70 feet up and the fall's on to your elbow – for a minute there you feel pretty intense. It's not just climbing or driving fast – there are a billion ways that human beings look for that type of intensity, and quite a lot of worthwhile ways you can look for it, lots of mystic religions have got ways of looking for it, which probably do your character a lot more good than stoking your BMW up to 145 and taking some more coke. The world is, or ought to be, more than it is."

It would be a mistake to assume that because in the past Harrison's work

has often been set in grim urban landscapes peopled by characters who are invariably dissatisfied with their lot that he is peddling a miserabilist, defeatist message. Close reading suggests rather that he is longing for something.

"Certainly the last three or four novels and most of my short stories since the mid-1970s have been about that. The guy in 'Egnaro' says it outright and all the poor bastard gets is this kind of postmodern fast-food metaphor at the end, you know, instead of some kind of transfiguration of the world. Which is my way of doing what Choe does, really, dumping on it, dumping on the entire concept, because it means too much to you. In *Signs of Life* Isobel is the only winner, because she stuck by the dream, however pathetic her dream is."

But it's not as simple as



that. Isobel doesn't just want her dream, she also wants China. Maybe we can't have our dreams as well as an ordinary substructure of reality.

"Linked to this idea of wanting the world to be more than it is is the idea of trying to escape from the world as it is. I think that first appears in 'Egnaro.' Isobel is yet another fine-tuning of those kinds of issues and concerns. The reason I started to read anything, let alone fantasy or science fiction, and the reason I started to write anything, let alone fantasy or science fiction, was escape, and after having done it for ten years I was forced to confront that idea by my own internal workings. Isobel is just the latest statement of that, but so are Choe and the narrator. They're trying to escape from themselves by making their situation more exciting all the time. I'm being forced more and more to ask, okay, how do we make a distinction between escapism of the shoot-up-40-grammes-of-medical-grade-cocaine-and-try-to-set-fire-to-a-piece-of-glass variety – how do

we separate that, which is escapism – or is it? – from a metaphysical need for the world to be more intense than it is, which is almost a religious idea. What's the difference between the two, or what are the similarities between the two? There are no oppositions in my work, in that sense, I wouldn't want to oppose one to the other, but I would like to be constantly moving around the issue, revealing all the sides of the issue that I can."

Born in 1945, M. John Harrison sold his first story, to *Science Fantasy*, in 1966. His first novel, *The Committed Men*, appeared from New Authors Ltd five years later. He has since published a further seven novels, three collections of short stories and

one graphic novel (with Ian Miller). Although his early work was aimed – at least marketed – directly at science fiction and fantasy readers, nowadays he is perceived as a mainstream writer. A mainstream writer who continues to appeal to that part of his original audience which considers good writing more important than whether there are spaceships or not. His novels these days attract glowing reviews in the literary pages of the broadsheets – he's even been nominated for the *Guardian* Fiction Prize and he's won the Boardman Tasker Prize for

Mountain Literature – but somehow he has not become a household name. He does not shift copies like McEwan or Amis. He should be doing. He's getting a little sick of constantly being described as the most underrated writer of his generation. It could get to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Maybe, however, all that is about to change. In *Viriconium*, its *Guardian* Fiction Prize nomination notwithstanding, was dressed up as belonging to the fantasy genre – rather than, say, magic realism – which could have been enough to deter the narrow-minded. Numb-skulls might have thought *Climbers* was a book about rock-climbing and nothing else. *The Course of the Heart* was an uncompromising narrative, enormously rewarding if you accepted its challenge; it took no prisoners. If *Signs of Life* can be described as "easier to read" that is not to say it is inferior to or slighter than anything which preceded it. Far from it. Perhaps "easier to live with" gets it better. It's not (quite) as dark as *The Course of the Heart* or *The Ice Monkey*. Despite some bleak moments, it's not depressing or com-



pletely pessimistic. There's some hope in the outcome. There are some survivors for once.

"That's the first time," Harrison admits. "It's the first time anybody comes out of it – I mean, nobody comes out of it with much credit – but there certainly are some survivors, even poor old China and Christina have something at the end of it, some sort of relationship, and the only person who doesn't get anything is the person who steadfastly refuses to have any hope, he dooms himself.

"There's a very great difference," he continues, "between the human being, the writer, and the writer as implied by a given book. That's to say there are three M. John Harrisons: there's Mike Harrison the human being, there's M. John Harrison the writer – who is actually quite different because I can be something on a piece of paper that I don't allow myself to be in ordinary life – and then there's the writer implied by the text. Mike Harrison is really quite an optimistic guy and always was, optimistic in the sense of being constantly cheerful, picking himself up, carrying on with a grin, liking mornings, liking sunshine. My ideal day is to wake up early, make love to somebody, eat a huge breakfast and go out climbing in the sunshine, not risk my life in any way, not have any black moods, finish climbing, then eat a great deal more, then make more

love. If we could all live like that I believe that the world would be a better place. But you don't see much of him in the books. I would like us to see more of him in the books. Humour is part of the key for me. The happier I get with using humour, the more I think I'm able to release Mike Harrison rather than M. John. M. John's been around for a long time.

"There's more. There's a very sentimental Mike Harrison, whose ideas about the world would these days, I think, be considered mawkish and a bit politically incorrect, whose favourite book is *Love For Lydia* by H. E. Bates, you know, a book which was out of date when it was written in 1952. All I can do is develop. I try not to run too fast. I like to keep very considerable control of this development. I remember saying to John Clute that if I keep too much control, I'll be dead before I finish the development. I might have to take a risk soon and write what I would think of as an extremely sentimental and mawkish romance. *Signs of Life* was in a way a test bed for a romance, a romance of the world, no science fiction, no fantasy, no horror – just two people. It would certainly be an interesting way to go."

The generation thing is misleading, and the "underrated" tag unhelpful. The point is that M. John Harrison is one of the most exciting and consistently brilliant writers cur-

rently working in the English language and those who haven't yet realized it soon will. If *Signs of Life* wins him fresh award nominations and new readers, that will be a heartening indication of vitality among both the critical community and the reading public. Ménière's syndrome notwithstanding, it would be good to see Harrison climbing again – up the bestseller lists.

*Signs of Life* is published in London by Victor Gollancz at £16.99 and in New York by St Martin's Press at \$21.95.

## Published Books by M. John Harrison

### Novels

*The Committed Men* (1971)  
*The Pastel City* (1971)  
*The Centauri Device* (1974)  
*A Storm of Wings* (1980)  
*In Viriconium* (1982)  
*Climbers* (1989)  
*The Course of the Heart* (1992)  
*Signs of Life* (1997)

### Short-Story Collections

*The Machine in Shaft Ten* (1975)  
*The Ice Monkey* (1983)  
*Viriconium Nights* (1985)

### Graphic Novel

*The Luck in the Head* (1991)

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Later, Jim was to remember the blithe innocence with which Della distributed her tokens of love on that fateful morning. Della thought of herself as a victim of poverty, but she knew that she lived in a rich world. She only smiled when Jim opined – as he often did – that it was too rich for its own good.

Jim had always taken a secret and slightly shameful delight in the fact that – unlike him – Della was one of those happy lovers who see their good fortune reflected in the world around them.

While she was in the grip of passion she was a sucker for the pathetic fallacy. She thought the sun was smiling when it shone, and that the rain which fell with increasing rarity was exercising generosity in lending fertility to the earth. She thought the late Anita Roddick had been a commercial saint and that Ben and Jerry still were, even though they seemed to be suing one another to death through every court in America. She thought the Magi were second-generation commercial saints, and she adored their slogans, especially GIVE THE GIFT OF NEW LIFE.

Jim had always been cynical about the Magi, of course. Jim was cynical about everything, even when he was in love – and he *was* in love, no matter how hard Della sometimes had to work to make him say so.

“The only reason the stuff is so cheap,” Jim had told her, when she had finished planting a constellation of starbursts in the trunk of the tree whose crown had shaded their first kiss, “is because it costs next to nothing to produce. That’s the thing about biotech; once you have the process and the plant the product makes itself. Because it caught on in such a big way even their advertising costs are minimal. If they stick up a billboard in London saying YOU CAN’T PUT A PRICE ON NEW LIFE, it’s being quoted everywhere from Land’s End to John O’Groats within two days even though it’s a flat lie. The price is 50 pence a packet – which breaks down as 49 per cent packaging and promotion and 49 per cent profit. They’re making a fortune.”

“I want to do the bench next,” Della had said, meaning the bench overlooking the lake where they used to meet when Della was in her last year at school and Jim was doing the first year of his computer course at the tech.

“You’re not supposed to do public property,” Jim had reminded her half-heartedly. “The council reckon that NEW LIFE is just a kind of graffiti.”

“The final indictment of the political mindset,” she had riposted, quoting from a TV programme they’d watched at his insistence. He remembered that he’d grinned, but that behind the grin he’d reflected – not at all kindly – on the fact that NEW LIFE had almost sent graffiti the way of the dinosaurs, along with wallpaper, body-piercing and the Stone Age version of a girl’s best friend. It was, to quote another of the Magi’s catch-phrases, BRIGHT, BEAUTIFUL AND BIODEGRADABLE. The Church of England had not announced plans to change the wording of the nation’s favourite hymn again, but some people had reckoned that it was only a matter of time even though “All things bright, beautiful and biodegradable” would play merry hell with the scansion.

# The GIFT of the MAGI

*Francis Amery*

That day, as on all days, Della had been wearing NEW LIFE flowers in her hair. She also had NEW LIFE tattoos in places no one but Jim – not even her mother – had ever seen. Now she had decided to scatter NEW LIFE starbursts in every place that was romantically significant – although she naturally preferred “sacred” to “significant” – to Jim and herself.

They were, of course, far from the first to indulge such a whim; the tree was already decorated with a dozen imaginatively designed constellations, which collaborated in obscuring all the initials people had carved into the trunk in technologically unsophisticated times.

Even Jim the Callous Cynic – who naturally preferred to think of himself as Jim the Sensible Sceptic – had not been untouched by the fad. Although, in theory, he did not approve of epidermal embellishment he had allowed Della to buy him a rather elaborate “orchid” to cover up an unsightly birthmark on his neck. Della didn’t mind his constant protests to any and all third parties that he only wore it to please *her*, partly because she didn’t believe it and partly because she did.

Anyhow, they had done the bench. Then they had done the bus shelter, although there was no way that their constellation of celebratory nanonovae was ever going to be visible against the galactic background that had turned the shelter into a passable imitation of an ice-cave. They had already done the back seat of Jim’s



second-hand Citroen, but not in starbursts. Starbursts weren't so sharply-faceted that they were uncomfortable to sit on if you had your clothes on, but for seats that were supposed to be more welcoming than park benches there were more delicate kinds of NEW LIFE called silksheen and velvours – appellations which the Magi had contrived to trademark, thus making up for their failure to persuade the relevant authorities that from now on they and they alone were entitled to be architects and masters of “new life.”

“We really ought to do the town-hall clock,” Della had told Jim, as the hands of the offending entity moved inexorably towards two o'clock – which meant that Della had to return helter-skelter to the offices of Scarfe and Sallis, Solicitors, where she had recently begun working, while Jim had to sprint to the class that everybody referred to as “Advanced BASIC” although the soulless college authorities insisted on labelling it “Programming Languages III.”

“It rules the life of everyone in town, not just ours,” Jim had pointed out – although he hadn't been so scrupulous about the bus shelter. “Anyway, it's rather nice to have something that rises above the fad, don't you think? All the more appropriate that it should be a clock-tower that's seen out three or four generations of our ancestors. NEW LIFE may be everywhere you look today and tomorrow, but by the time our kids are kissing their girlfriends and boyfriends goodbye it'll all be...”

He would probably have said “ancient history,” but they were late enough already and Della didn't want their own goodbye kiss to be reduced to a token peck on the cheek. When she had finally let him go she had run off along the street and he had watched her footfalls, half-expecting magical flowers to blossom on every spot that was blessed by her clicking heels.

By five o'clock, of course, Jim's poetic judgment of the town hall clock's ability to sail serenely through the storms of fashion had acquired an irony of which, on any other occasion, he would have been fiercely proud. The news must have broken around half past three, and such was the efficiency of the college rumour-mill that it took wing through the corridors as soon as the three o'clock lectures and seminars staggered to their end.

Jim was supposed to spend the last hour of the day on one of the terminals in Room 31 but he spent the time watching the TV instead, along with everyone else. The TVs were usually locked up, except when the Media Studies people were doing their thing, but someone had fetched all the keys and switched every single set to *Sky News*. The staff didn't bother to offer portentous comments about the chance to see history in the making; they just gawked along with everybody else.

At first there was a more-or-less even split between those who thought that it was Son of MacLibel or an infoterrorism spectacular visited upon the Magi by Greenpeace's psyops division and those who thought that the matter could never have got as far as actual arrests without there being some truth in the allegations. The arguments which sprang up among the flabbergasted watchers were conducted in the usual hectic spirit – but from the very first moment of awful revelation Jim knew that the real test of faith would be measured in actions rather than arguments.

Had he not been in love Jim would probably have been one of those most determined to stand fast against hysteria, proclaiming that if damage had been done at all then it had been done already. He might have continued wearing his only item of NEW LIFE adornment, not just for a day or a week but for a lifetime – but he *was* in love, and he peeled the orchid off his neck as soon as the import of the newscasters' feverish message had sunk in.

It didn't hurt a bit as it parted company with his own flesh. He dropped it on the floor and methodically ground it beneath his heel against the implacable surface of the tech's polished plastic tiling until it was nothing but a pulpy smear.

He was not alone. By the time the town hall clock actually struck five, nine out of every ten students – male and female alike – had torn off every last item of “jewellery,” every last “tattoo,” and every last spangle from their clothing. The news was still coming in, and the men from rent-a-don had only just begun to piece their tentative scientific explanations together, but Jim couldn't wait. He knew that he had to get to Della.

Della didn't officially finish work until half-past, and one or other of the partners always had an extra ten or fifteen minutes' work for her to do before she actually left, so the customary calculus of time would have ruled that there was no need to hurry – but the customary calculus of time had been suspended, and seemed as if it might never be restored.

Jim ran, not to their usual meeting-place but all the way to the offices of Scarfe and Sallis. He ran through a world transformed by the fad-to-end-all-fads that NEW LIFE had become, because its public manifestations were so much more beautiful than graffiti. He knew, though, that the public manifestations were superficial by comparison with its private ones. NEW LIFE had insinuated itself into everyone's home, everyone's person and everyone's life. In the struggle for existence which was the arena of modern commerce it had proved itself the fittest product ever; natural selection had sent it surging into dozens of different niches, supplementing if not actually displacing all other forms of decoration and adornment. NEW LIFE was fragrant as well as lovely; it had out-competed perfumes and deodorants as easily as it had outcompeted jewellery and gloss paint. People even stuck it down their toilet bowls to cover the acidity of the stuff that was guaranteed to kill all known germs and 99 per cent of those as-yet-unknown.

When he reached his destination Jim found Della in tears – which saddened him, although not as much as he would have been saddened by the prospect of having to break the news to her himself.

She was crying, but she hadn't begun the work of removing her own adornments. He wondered whether she would save that awful task for later, perhaps for the privacy of her bathroom or bedroom.

“Is it true?” she said, although she must have known that it was. “Mr Sallis says it must be.”

Jim could imagine Mr Sallis salivating in the expectation of his share of the business that the fall of the Magi would generate – but when Mr Sallis actually came out of the inner office he looked as bleak as anyone else, and he didn't tell Jim to go away.

“You'd better come in and listen to this,” Mr Sallis



said to Della, in a way that didn't exclude Jim. "One of my esteemed colleagues has been instructed to issue a statement to the press on behalf of the arrested men."

Della followed the solicitor and Jim followed Della. Mr Sallis only had a portable TV with a nine-inch screen, but it was big enough to display teletext share prices and it was big enough to record the end of civilization-as-generations-past-had-known-it.

The lawyer had already started. His clients, it seemed, wanted to put an end to the confusion that many people must be feeling. They intended to plead guilty to any and all charges that were brought against them, and they freely admitted that although the NEW LIFE had passed every safety test which the law required before it could be marketed its genetic make-up had been cunningly designed in such a way that its properties would undergo a profound change in response to infection by a second artificial organism: a crystalline virus. The inventors of NEW LIFE further admitted that they had recently released the trigger-virus into the environment in frank defiance of the law governing such releases. The effect of the trigger-virus was to cause the plant-like cells of NEW LIFE organisms to become independent pseudobacterial cells capable of infecting human beings. The resultant infections were not intended to do mortal harm to anyone, but they would so affect the endometrial tissues in the great majority of female victims as to make it impossible for fertilized egg-cells to implant in their wombs.

"In brief," murmured Mr Sallis, just in case Della and Jim hadn't quite taken it in, "the so-called Magi have just attempted to sterilize the entire female population of the Western World, and may even have succeeded. The day before yesterday they got the Queen's Award for Industry for their services to the balance of trade; the day after tomorrow they'll be up in the European Court of Human Rights, charged with the extremest violation of Article 12."

Della still hadn't begun to pluck the offending objects off her face, let alone her more intimate coverts and cavities.

"At first," Jim murmured, feeling that some kind of reply was necessary, "people at college thought that it might be some ecofreak slander – but it's the people at NEW LIFE who were the ecofreaks all along. This is the first real ecoterrorist bomb."

"Not so much a bomb as an antibomb," Mr Sallis said, anxious to prove that a solicitor could always upstage a mere student. "If it works, the population explosion just turned into a damp squib."

Della was running her hands over her abdomen, reflexively measuring her waistline. Jim had seen her do it before, just as absent-mindedly, but not for the same reason she was doing it now.

The solicitor on her screen was coming to the end of his statement now. He looked like a man who had been forced a lemon, although he was probably trying as hard as he could to think of all the work that would inevitably flow from his new-found celebrity. "My clients have instructed me to say that their purpose is not to harm individuals, but to save the world from impending ecocatastrophe," he declared, using his manner to distance himself from the contents of his speech. "They have instructed me to say that those who have sacrificed what

they considered to be their greatest treasure have done so for the sake of a greater good. Of all the gifts which my clients have given to the world – that is their description, not mine – they consider the last to be the best and the wisest. That is why they named themselves the Magi."

"Gold, frankincense and myrrh," muttered Mr Sallis.

"Actually, I don't think so," Jim said, less glad than he might have been about the opportunity to upstage the upstager. "I think it's the O. Henry story they have in mind, about the girl and the boy who were very much in love, and sold their best possessions to buy one another gifts which they could no longer use – gifts Henry judges to be the best and wisest of all by virtue of their relative cost."

"They weren't allowed to have NEW LIFE all to themselves," said Della, softly – Jim presumed that she was referring to the manufacturers' unsuccessful attempt to register the term as a trademark – "but they took it anyway."

"It always belonged to them," Jim told her, not meaning the Magi in particular but all the inventors in history, all the makers of human civilization and human life, "and we always had to pay for it. The problem was that they always set the price too low."

He knew even as he said it – and remembered, later, with profound feeling – that her tears wouldn't last forever. She had always thought of herself as a victim of poverty in a rich world: a world that was, as he had always argued, too rich for its own good.

Francis Amery's previous stories in *Interzone* were "Self-Sacrifice" (issue 54), "Alfonso the Wise" (issue 105), "Lucifer's Comet" (issue 111) and "When Molly Met Elvis" (issue 118). He lives in Berkshire, and lately has written a number of entries on French-language authors for the forthcoming reference book *The St James Guide to Horror, Ghost and Gothic Writers*.

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“Why are the police taking this so seriously?” asks James Ballard, as the authorities raid the most inspired new scene in Cronenberg’s *Crash*, Vaughan and Seagrave’s live-action reconstruction of Jimmy Dean’s death-collision as a spectacle for a small audience of like-minded paraphiles. “It’s not the police,” says Dr Helen Remington ominously: “it’s the *Department of Transport...*” Before November 1996, this raid might have seemed one of the movie’s few misjudgments; a subtle but essential feature of Ballard’s novel, tracked here with a faithfulness bordering on obsession, is that Vaughan’s circle of techno-scopophile deviants, far from being perceived by the authorities as a threat, don’t even show up on the political radar. But in the majestic piece of performance art that is *Crash* the event, the raid is a key scene. In its modest way, *Crash* did its bit in bringing down the British government: not directly, of course, but as one of the most demonstrative flourishes of fixated absurdity that characterized the final stages of this hoodlum regime and its narrow band of hangers-on in its retreat into its own private reality, before it crashed and burned in an apocalyptic spectacle to be endlessly replayed on video (highlights £12.99 from BBC Enterprises). It is clear now that Virginia Bottomley was already rehearsing her own political death in a twisted re-enactment of Jayne Mansfield’s fatal wreckage, and that the collector’s-edition *Daily Mail* front page with BAN THIS CAR CRASH SEX FILM will stand forever as this enigmatic, nearly-sexual blonde woman’s final monument.

Now that the wreckage has been cleared away, it’s possible to review the events of these last months with detachment. At the cost of a tiresome but tolerable five months’ delay in *Crash*’s public release, the outcome has been to turn a small and almost-perversely uncommercial film into a surreal, sensational performance event; shift more copies of Ballard’s least-reread novel in six months than in the preceding 23 years; leave jerky-kneed Associated Newspapers and the councils of Westminster and North Lanarkshire with semen stains all over their faces; and build up the best box-office momentum for an art-house release since *Last Tango in Paris*. On balance, it’s a dream result for a humane, touching film whose one disappointment, though now the ironic core of the larger event, is its quietness, lack of threat, and utter incapacity to deprave or corrupt anyone whatever. I don’t find much cause with the complaints that it’s dull, or emotionally distant, or less extreme than the novel – though it is the last of these, but what on earth was anyone expecting? Nobody whinged about losing all the jism-spurting

teenage sexual hangings in *Naked Lunch*, and this is a far closer, tighter, and better transcription of the filmable stratum of its source.

I suspect Cronenberg didn’t really mean his *Crash* to be so generally unerotic as it’s turned out, and it would have been at least as good a film with a more conventional approach to the poetics of violence; it’s hard to think of another movie, especially from someone with Cronenberg’s amply-proven mastery of pounding the pulse, whose treatment of violence is so perversely adrenalin-free. But it’s good-looking, well-cast and -played, and finely-soundtracked by Howard Shore in the best yet of his scores for Cronenberg; and many of its small weaknesses (thin narrative, under-written characters, wandering interest in figures like the underused Remington) are the result of overfaithful adherence to the novel, in marked contrast to the liberal grafts of new storyline that scarred *Naked Lunch*. My one substantial regret, having spent most of my own car time over the last four years on the hauntingly-resonant flyovers of west London between Paddington and the M25, is the enforced loss, in the transplantation to Toronto, of Ballard’s profound sense of specific place and landscape – though the odd Middlesex place-name has been piquantly retained, including to my delight Ashford hospital, where I was thrilled to be taken with a concussion sustained in a road accident shortly after the original London press show. (Er, I fell off my bicycle on a sleeping policeman.)

In the original PR round, Ballard liked to claim that *Crash* goes beyond the novel, which for the most part it doesn’t: it’s less graphic, less funny, and notably less bonkers. But the new ending is moving and right, and an amazing number of unfilmable things are handled with disarming delicacy – including the famous shagging of Rosanna Arquette’s leg-wound, a joyous piece of daftness in the book that on screen becomes the film’s purest Cronenberg moment. Above all, in an audience of 70 or so at the screening I saw, there was not a single titter throughout the film: no mean achievement considering how packed the movie is, like the book, with sly moments of deadpan humour that test, and finally defy, the boundary between earnest obsession and crazed comedic invention. (Try very hard not to think of Christopher Walken in *Annie Hall* when Spader first offers Holly Hunter a lift.) It’s not easy to make out where Cronenberg goes from here, or how he can ever again be either bothered or trusted with a commercial film; but if *Crash* is the culmination of his post-commercial career, it’s no small part of its larger achievement that so many people so spectacularly failed to get it.



It's harder to see why *The Fifth Element* went down in such spectacular critical flames, at least on its debut before the world in Cannes. True, French critics have always had notoriously little love for Luc Besson's glossy, stylized visions, and maybe they'd rather have seen 400 million francs of Gaumont's money spread on something more culturally-correct; but you'd expect the international posse to be less stubborn in the face of grand-scale cosmic silliness done with such wit, pace, and gorgeous sense of spectacle. Part of the baggage may be that it's a genuinely comicsy film – far more so than *Batman and Robin*, say, and in a very European way that isn't really recognizable to Hollywood sensibility. Besson's made no secret of the fact that the Moebius influence goes far deeper than his active role on the film's designs; the whole image-led narrative style, so alien to Hollywood and most Anglo-American sf, is recognizably indebted to Giraud's exasperatingly-senseless storylines and the rich tradition of daftness in French sf taste that outworlders find so hard to take. But Besson and his Hollywood co-writer are perfectly aware of, and willing to ironize, the juvenility of its author's own pubescent private mythology, and the few po-faced moments of dreadful Gallic cod-philosophy pass swiftly enough. If anything, the very minimalism of the plot has a postmodern charm of its own, with its nakedly-functional McGuffins, deadlines, prophecies, and breezily non-anthropomorphic antagonist consisting simply of a very large special effect incarnating total absolute ultimate evil cosmic darkness, opposed only by the Bruce Willis character at his most self-parodic and a babetastic kickboxing Supreme Being.

All the same, I don't see *The Fifth Element* fulfilling its makers' dreams of defining the visual style of the future for the next generation. Unlike *Blade Runner*, which Besson and team freely admit they're out to beat, *Element's* style is too lavish, diffuse, and above all expensive to be easily imitable, whereas the great thing about future-noir, like its antecedents, is that from the start it was customized for affordability. But there's no denying Besson's vision is a gust of fresh air, a binge for the eyes, and a genuine stimulus to overdue thought about what a post-noir visualization of the future might actually be like. There are a hundred and one things not to buy, from monster plot holes to Bruce's Jewish momma to the barely tolerable, let alone amusing, Chris Tucker character (Besson lesson 1.0: comic relief is not normally called for in a comedy). But it's all propelled at a refreshing clip by a sharp sense of comic timing and (especially) editing, and in the tradition of the best Pinewood blockbusters has its pockets stuffed with hang-on-isn't-that cameos. As the non-



sensical title McGuffin, Milla Jovovich is almost as irresistible as the truest star, Willis's astounding mad-eyed cat; and it's just so liberating to see a big, silly space opera that faithfully incarnates the values of French sf and golden-age 1970s BD, its narrative floating free on an ocean of image and dreamlike non-science that thumbs all seven of its purple noses at the dreary imperialism of Anglo-Saxon logic.

No less charming, and similarly unabashed in its wry nostalgia for a misspent youth when space movies didn't have to apologize for being there, is cheeky-cheapie veteran Stuart Gordon's likewise comics-inspired *Space Truckers*, which credits Bernie Wrightson and Ron Cobb among its conceptual designers, and plays Joe the Dead with the laws of movie genetics by force-breeding a bizarre chimera of *Convoy* and *Aliens*. Whether a film with such a very 80s, very rental title can convince anyone it's a serious cinema proposition is a gamble, but it's certainly B-meister Gordon's supreme achievement. Not the least of the many heartening things about the career of Charles Band's Empire's quondam star director is that he remains such an unreconstructed torch-carrier for fresh, fun and foolish low-budget B-pics, in

the mid-range of a genre that has become increasingly polarized between studio blockbusters at the one end and slightly-sad cable and video pabulum at the other. It clearly isn't an easy niche to hold, and Gordon's recent projects have had to trek the globe to ever-unlikelier bases: Gordon's last UK cinema release *Fortress* was made in Queensland, while *Space Truckers* is the first sf movie shot entirely in Ireland.

But over the years Gordon has got amazingly good at what he does, and though *Space Truckers* bids a regretful farewell to the repertory company of much-loved B-players that have beguiled us ever since *Re-Animator*, its craftsmanship is irresistible bordering on gobsmacking. The ending alone, which follows a preposterous action finale with (i) a cleverly-prepared romantic twist and (ii) an effortless-looking climactic display of bravura throwaway plotting, is up there with the last 60 seconds of *The Palm Beach Story*. All the cast yield good returns, but Charles Dance's cyborg space pirate cap'n is a creation bordering on the sublime: leering over captive bimbos as "gratifyingly approachable," and pull-starting his cybermechanical wedding tackle (savour the wonderful sound effect here) with the irresistible bedroom



line "I emit a low-level electrical whang pulse designed to drive women wild with pleasure." Gordon's fellow Empire survivor Screaming Mad George trumps all his previous best to build a special-effects industry out of emerald nothing; and the whole thing rolls off into the starlight with the best end-title song of the decade, a stupendous techno version of "Cotton Eye Joe" (credited to someone called "Red-nex" who clearly don't exist, but really ought to be invented just so they can lay down the definitive album of drum'n'bass renditions of "Six Days on the Road" and "Tombstone Every Mile"). There are some rather poor fake-American accents, but otherwise Irish sf cinema looks auspiciously like trucking on down the line.

A more mainstream, studio-compliant version of the same kind of cheery professional hokum from practised genre funsters is on display in *The Relic*, Gale Anne Hurd (prod.) and Peter Hyams (dir.)'s vastly-improved palimpsest of Douglas Preston & Lincoln Child's original nonsense thriller of "fractal evolution" (don't ask) run splatter riot in Preston's former place of work, the New York Museum of Natural History. Like *Space Truckers*, it opts for B-list stars who offset affordability with unassuming charm that you nevertheless wouldn't particularly want to sleep with: Tom Sizemore, who could look so like George Clooney if he'd just shed a stone or four, and Penny Ann Miller, whose casting is a bit of a puzzle till you see how she reacts to being slobbered up and down by a six-foot braineating mutant-dinosaur tongue. (The credits include a separate item for "Kothoga Tongue Animation"; money well spent, if you're asking me.) Successive rewrites seem to have selected against most of the decidedly ho-hum novel's plot, characters and incidents, including the status of the title artefact as any kind of serious red herring, and all explanation of the para-Darwinian "Callisto Effect" itself (named for the lassie in Ovid rather than the Jovian moon, but you have to consult the novel to learn this). The resulting mutation is a slick, silly seat-edge suspenser, using the Museum more overtly than the novel does as a satiric microcosm of urban America – with the ruling classes gobbling canapés upstairs while a nameless Precolumbian horror out of time, borne in from the third world to infect the layers below, stalks them from the subterranean labyrinth of basement and sewer, with only the brave boys of the Chicago PD to hold anarchy at bay by creeping round dark corridors with weak torches in maximally-vulnerable teams of two.

One striking enhancement to the novel, whose own very mildly-amusing insider sketch of museum politics is presumably partly *à clef*, is a sly alle-

gorical mapping between the academic world of pimping for grants and the only-slightly more ethical world of movie finance. (A very long list of mostly-TV co-producers in the opening credits even includes the BBC, who must be, erhem, looking to broaden their portfolio.) At the centre of both novel and film is the celebrity opening of the Museum's latest spectacle, an unprecedentedly-populist exhibition on superstition that has won funding over an academically-worthier, but far less commercial, event on evolution. But the movie version adds a whole extra subplot about rival bids for research grants, and turns the issue of academic freedom into an unusually-frank debate (well, exchange of one-

liners, but this is Hollywood) about reconciling the demands of culture and commerce. ("Using superstition to sell the Museum is like using topless ushers in the Bolshoi Ballet.")

I don't think Hyams and accomplices have anything to apologize for; but 20 years back, when the Hyams of *Capricorn One* was carving out a fledgling career as an earnest writer-director doing offbeat political subjects in near-contemporary sf settings, and the Cronenberg of *Shivers* and *Rabid* was an established purveyor of witty, preposterous biosplatter, imagine you'd been asked to guess which of the pair would eventually make *Crash* and which *The Relic*. Evolution, eh? Boom.

Nick Lowe

# TUBE CORN

Wendy Bradley

— So what are you going to write about this time?  
 — What do you mean?  
 — Your column? Haven't you got a deadline coming up?  
 — What date is it? (Expletive deleted)  
 It can't be that time already. I have no idea. Aaaargh! (Expletive deleted. Panic.)  
 — Well, what's on?  
 — Nothing.  
 — There can't be "nothing" on: you're always setting the video for stuff.  
 — Nothing good.  
 — I know. What about *Superman*?  
 That one the other week, what was it called, "A.K.A Superman," was actually quite good. There was a sort of a plot, and some jokes, and you almost believed it.  
 — Yes but that's been the first good one this season. What about "Faster Than a Speeding Vixen" the next week?  
 — I'll bet you only liked "A.K.A. Superman" because it was the annual episode where they give Jimmy Olsen more than two lines. It's the same with *Seaquest*. You only watch that for Jonathan Brandes. I worry about this thing you have for pretty young men.  
 — Oh, come on: would you be saying that to me if I were a bloke who fancied Teri Hatcher or the girl from *Seaquest*? I think I can be a *bit* more objective than that. The point about *Seaquest* is that Lucas Wolenczak is a functional character in his own right whereas in *Superman* Jimmy Olsen functions like the messenger in a Greek tragedy, to fill in the holes in the plot with nuggets of information. Any villain worth his salt stops to take Lucas hostage on his way out of the building but they could happily

spare Jimmy for half a series of "absent phone call" schtick  
 — "Jimmy says there's an abandoned mine shaft, da de da..." – and you wouldn't actually miss him. Although I do concede they're both cute as a bug's ear.  
 — "Cute as a bug's ear"? Have you been reading Robert Parker again?  
 — Whatever. Anyway, the point is that, whatever the personal charms of Mr Whalin and Mr Brandes, the characters they play are the familiar boy-genius Wesley Crusher clone, but Olsen is plot-redundant and Wolenczak isn't redundant but central.  
 — Just out of interest, how did you feel about Wesley Crusher?  
 — Remember the Internet newsgroup called something like "EnsignWesley-diediedie"? Sort of like that.  
 — And did he?  
 — Damifino. Surely nobody watches *Star Trek* these days?  
 — But it's on all the time!

— Well, that's the point really, isn't it? The *Star Trek* franchise has moved into a virtual space where you never have to actually sit down and *watch* any of it. First the magazines tell you what's going to happen. Then they review what has happened. Then it's out on video. Then it's on Sky. Then on terrestrial. Then repeated. Repeated again. Goes into syndication and repeats again, on more and more obscure channels, ad infinitum. But at no point is there ever a sense that you'll miss something if you don't actually *watch* it.  
 — I saw one of the original *Star Treks* the other day and I thought, "ooh yes, now I see it." When I was a kid I



always wondered why Kirk kept getting off with different alien women each week but back in the 60s he really was something, wasn't he?

– You fancy Captain Smirk but you think *I'm sick*?

– What about the other ones then?

That film you dragged me to see where they supposedly killed Kirk off; all those blokes.

– *The Next Generation*? Never watch it.

– Why not?

– No one fanciable in it, plus the sexual politics make me homicidal.

– Isn't there a contradiction in terms there?

– I don't think so. I make no bones about liking to look at pretty young men, any more than a bloke would need to apologize for liking looking at pretty young women. But I also want to see an imagined future that imagines our sexual politics might move out of the ark by the time we get out of our gravity well.

– I suppose so. Well what about the other two? Are they any better?

– *Deep Space Nine*: never did get into that, although I've watched the occasional episode. They seem to be making a thing out of choosing captains with gorgeous voices and Sisko certainly has that. And at least there are a couple of active female characters, even if their brains do have to be explained away with alien symbionts. But, again, null points for fanciability.

– I thought we were supposed to fancy the doctor – *ER* in hyperspace or whatever?

– I think it's hormonal wilfulness: you know they intend him to be the fanciable one so you go "ooh no, no thanks."

– So what about *Voyager* then?

Surely you must like that one.

They've finally got a woman captain, haven't they? I'd have thought you'd be cheering her on whatever.

– Yes, but it's Thatcher Syndrome again: you want the job opened up for women but not *that* woman. She makes me even more homicidal than *The Next Generation*. That hairdo.

That maternal streak. That sex life.

– Sex life? What, like Captain Smirk, she gets off with a different alien boy in green body paint and a spangled cod-piece each week? Bit of a slapper, eh?

– No, no. Just the opposite in fact. If only they had had the guts to make Janeway into a roaring girl, let her go roistering round the stars getting off with anyone she wanted each week, it might have been worth watching. As it is, she's just another one of those sad television stereotypes who behave as though you can't have a career and a life. And the other thing about *Voyager* is, I don't believe in the basic premise. I can't take all this "millions of light years from base and can't get home" stuff. Captain Smirk never met anything he couldn't deal with in

45 minutes.

– There's a basic premise to *Voyager*?

I watched a couple of episodes and I never noticed – they flew through space and met stuff. I thought that was what happened in a *Star Trek*.

– Yes: they're supposed to be stranded on the other side of the galaxy with no way of getting home that won't take them 70 years. And running out of coffee.

– Now that would be serious. So have you got any ideas for a column yet?

– "Why I Don't Watch *Star Trek* Any More?" I can't see the editor going for that, can you?

– OK, then, I know: what about *Wyrd Sisters*? You have to be watching that.

– I don't like Terry Pratchett.

– You've never read any Terry Pratchett!

– Well, all right then, I don't like the idea of Terry Pratchett.

– It's the hat, isn't it?

– Anyway I can't review *Wyrd Sisters* because I don't watch it. I know, why don't you review it? What's it like?

It's a cartoon, isn't it?

– Yes. It's quite good really – not too Disneyfied, not too chocolate-boxy.

Mind you, it's a terrible disadvantage to have read the books first. Not only do you have the usual problem of having formed your own ideas of the characters first, but you also know when the jokes are coming up, which rather sucks the humour out of them first.

– Is this one of the ones with Death

in it? How do they get around the Death-speaks-in-block-capitals thing?

– They let Christopher Lee do his voice and stick a lot of reverb on it, although I concede that it's a joke that doesn't translate very well from the page. Look, I CAN DO IT HERE IN PRINT AND IT'S PERFECTLY SIMPLE TO GET, THAT DEATH SPEAKS SOMEWHAT EMPHATICALLY BUT THEN HE WOULD, WOULDN'T HE, but if you read it out loud you lose the joke.

– Such as it is.

– You really are unreasonably

Pratchett-prejudiced, aren't you?

– You're right. It's the hat. And he reminds me of someone, but I just can't get it.

– Why don't you put your e-mail address in your column? Someone will e-mail you with who it is, I'll bet.

– It's [wbradley@easynet.co.uk](mailto:wbradley@easynet.co.uk).

– Well, while you're asking about the cat in the hat, ask your readers about June Whitfield singing "The hedgehog cannot be buggered."

– I beg your pardon?

– In *Wyrd Sisters* there're comic songs and you get June Whitfield as Nanny Ogg doing "The hedgehog cannot be buggered."

– On national television on a Sunday afternoon? You realize what this means?

– What?

– I may actually have to *watch* it.

– Oh, good. Well, at least that'll give you something to write about next month. Any ideas for this month yet?

– Not a one.

## Another Exchange

Dear David:

I'm surprised that Wendy Bradley still hasn't got around to reviewing the BBC's *Fantastic Future* eight-part series on science fiction. It screened here months ago. Has it not been shown in the UK yet?

**Greg Egan**

*Perth, Australia*

Dear Greg:

I'm afraid I'm not familiar with this eight-part BBC series you mention. It rings no bells...

Wait a minute – are you talking about the thing that was fronted by the American actress Gillian Anderson? It was on in 1996 in the UK. I only saw bits of it, but it seemed to be more about the future of technology than about sf. Maybe that was it? If so, it wasn't taken very seriously over here – it was regarded as more of a cash-in on *The X-Files* than anything else.

**David Pringle**

*Editor, Interzone*

Dear David:

That's a shame. It certainly suffered from stylistic excesses – lots of low-

angle nostril shots of sf celebrities, and poor Robert Forward made to look *very* silly by gazing portentously at the sky a lot. And obviously Anderson was chosen because of *The X-Files*. But in spite of that it struck me as surprisingly well researched, both from an sf-historical and a scientific point of view, with Clute the main talking head for the former and Forward for the latter, plus interviews with a lot of experts in specific fields, plus dozens of authors (Sterling, Cadigan, Robinson, Stephenson, Niven, Stableford etc). It didn't contain a lot that would have surprised any hardcore sf reader (though some of their examples of "first sf work to predict such-and-such" were news to me), but it certainly gave an image of *written* sf as important, visionary, scientifically literate etc. That's a far cry from the popular idea of sf-as-*Star Wars*-and-*X-Files* that you've recently been bemoaning in editorials. Less than cashing in on *The X-Files*, it struck me as the antidote for that poison, cleverly targeted at the people who needed it most.

But I guess they would have had to hire David Duchovny to lure Wendy Bradley away from Kevin Sorbo's trousers...

**Greg**





the flying-saucer business, Jack. It's history. That's why you're in Lawrence, Iowa, complaining about motels from a pay phone."

I sighed. "Look, Angie, it's my only saleable skill."

"Not very saleable, Jack. You've got to change with the times. Even my channelling clients get bigger bookings than you. Alien abductions are hot now. Can't you get your alien friends to snatch you for a few experiments? Work a little sex into it, and I can get you plenty of gigs on the West Coast. You could pull in a couple thousand every night of the year, not four or five hundred a pop for a month or two."

Angie has hustled herself a long way from her start as a secretary back when I was in aerospace. An agency hired her before the first layoffs, and within three years she had her own agency. Six years ago, when I walked in her door with a crazy idea, the Ramirez Agency was a one-woman show over a Mexican restaurant on the seedy side of Hollywood. She landed me a book contract and a saucer speaking tour back then; now she has a fancy suite with a secretary and two assistants. "Let me think about it," I said.

"Okay," she answered, with audible annoyance. "Now let me get back..."

"What about the motel, Angie?" I needed an alternative to the Motel 6 across Main Street that was "closed for renovations." I didn't want to sleep in a cornfield.

"Stupid database thinks it's still open. Nothing else is listed in Lawrence, but there is a motel in Wilson's Crossing. That's supposed to be the nearest town, north on Route 117."

I thanked her and wrote the phone number in my pocket calendar, hoping I wouldn't need it. I was due at the American Legion Hall in half an hour. I looked into the gas station and asked the kid who sat inside chewing gum, "Do you know where there's another motel?"

"No motels left in town, Mister. You gotta go to Wilson's Crossing, and that's 20 miles." He pointed lazily up the road.

I sighed and headed back to the Rent-A-Wreck. The Legion Hall and the usual rubber-chicken dinner were a few blocks the other way. The wide, white-painted hall sat between a parking lot and an aged brick building that once had been the local bank. Now a cash machine sat inside the wide double doors, and a faded "For Lease or Sale" sign was taped inside the windows. The town had fared as well as the aerospace industry.

A pickup and two big old Fords were already in the parking lot. Out front, a portable electric sign announced

my visit; "OUR ALIEN VISITORS: Jack Mills in Person, Friday, 7 p.m." I'd seen worse; oh, God, had I seen worse.

My pocket calendar gave the specifics. "Sponsor: Lawrence Ladies Club. Contact: Abigail Waverly, programme chair. After-dinner talk: 1 hour, with slides, questions to follow. Books: publisher has shipped, CHECK before talk. Signing afterwards. Speaking fee prepaid. Lodging provided." I checked for the slide carousel and slipped out of the car. With luck, I could check about a room before the talk.

Luck, alas, was not with me. The publisher had shipped three boxes of books, and two were mine. However, the third was one of the publisher's seamier efforts to penetrate the sex-manual market. It took ten minutes to convince the grandmotherly fossil who headed the Ladies' Club that I had nothing to do with that publication. Then I had to go over the slides with the high-school girl running the projector. By the time I was introduced to Miss Abigail Waverly, it was time for her to introduce me to everyone else at the head table.

I dutifully shook hands. Angie was right that my audience had the wrong demographics, tired and aging. Miss Waverly looked about 60, grey and bulky, with no discernible accent. You wouldn't notice her in a crowd of three.

"What happened to the motel?" I asked as we sat down.

"Don't worry," she assured me. "We have a place for you."

I was not reassured. I get some come-ons from lonely old women, and since Melinda left a few have been tempting. But most just want to talk my ear off.

The meal wasn't bad, with fresh corn on the cob, baked potatoes, tender pork chops, and apple pie. My tales of life near Los Angeles charmed the ladies. I told them about the Northridge quake, freeway traffic jams, and the craziness of the city, and they listened as if I came from another planet.

The talk was my usual spiel. I stand at a podium in a dim room where people sit at folding tables with coffee cups and desert plates scattered before them, and tell them what they want to hear about flying saucers. In my aerospace days, I had flipped overheads telling Pentagon paper-shufflers what they wanted to hear about monster lasers supposed to shoot down nuclear warheads. We pretended the paper lasers were real until their money and my job were gone.

I told the Ladies Club that the Brysst are an ancient and gentle race, who spent millions of years developing the wisdom and caution we lack. "Their distant star is a dull fire compared to our brilliant sun, and their planet huddles close to it for warmth. Yet because the Brysst sun is so faint and red, it burns its fuel far, far slower than our sun, and it will live billions of years after our sun is gone. This gives the Brysst their patience, and their patience gives them their wisdom."

I can do the spiel for hours if I have to; Melinda taught me well. She had 638 pages of it down on paper when we met, although she didn't tell me about it for a few weeks. When she did, I suggested doing a book proposal and running it by Angie. It started as science fiction, but Angie said it would sell better as "fact." I didn't like the idea, but by then I hadn't worked in two



and a half years, Melinda had just moved into my tiny apartment, and the rent was three months overdue.

Melinda and I spent eight wild and crazy months turning her "Meeting the Aliens" into *The Secret World of the Brysst*. I cut and pasted Melinda's pages and rewrote them on an old PC the company had sold for \$50 after the layoffs.

The publisher loved it, but Melinda freaked when Angie mentioned a promo tour. She flat-out wouldn't do it, and insisted we take her name off the book. I figured the weirding out was a legacy of her chequered past. I knew she had lived in a commune; she knew about my ex-wife the lawyer and my former career as a merchant of death. We preferred to avoid the gory details.

The paid speaking tours came after that, as Angie hustled the market for all it was worth. Melinda wrote more, but she wasn't happy with the second book, and started claiming that some of the acid hippies on the Oregon commune really were aliens. We fought over it before I left on the speaking tour; when I returned, she had moved out, leaving only a short note and a stack of bills.

The third book never came. "You have to have something new," Frances, my editor, had told me after she read the proposal. "Marketing says they can only sell two books on the same thing. Do a third and you cut into sales of the first two. Don't you have something new to say?" She suggested abductions and experiments, but after I hung up, I realized I could not make the Brysst snatch any human being who didn't want to go. They had too much of Melinda in them.

What I told the ladies of Lawrence was "the Brysst aren't ready for contact with all of humanity. But they gave me a message of hope for all intelligent beings in the universe: there can be peace, if we make it happen among ourselves." The spiel comes with pitches for toleration and racial harmony that I vary from place to place. Sometimes the whole thing sounds as outdated as the George Adamski book from the 50s that I picked up in a used bookstore, but it plays well in the American Heartland. My stories are more comforting than the supermarket tabloids. Angie summed it up as "You're safe weirdness."

They had questions, but the toughest one came from the high-school girl at the projector. "Do they have the same DNA and RNA genetic material we do?" I hedged, as I had learned to do when selling laser fantasies to colonels, then settled down to sign books.

The girl who had run the projector was first in line. If I had ever settled down, I could have had a kid her age. A couple dozen older ladies followed. I asked their names and signed each book, until only two were left in line.

The first was the president of the Ladies' Club. Her piercing blue eyes stared through me. "You certainly have had some interesting experiences, young man," she began. "I wish my Ralphie had grown up like you." She smiled as I signed her copy.

The second looked uncannily like Abigail Waverly, but wore a different dress. Before I could ask, she explained, "I'm Abigail's sister Hester." I signed her book, then glanced at the sales desk. Over half my books were gone, always nice even if I didn't make that much per copy. All I needed now was a place to unwind

# The SAUCER MAN

Jeff Hecht

and sleep before driving 180 miles to my next gig.

I slipped my pen into my pocket, stood, and stretched as politely and obviously as I could. It was a few minutes after ten; I'd earned my pay, and it was time to move on. "Excuse me, Miss Waverly. You said you'd made reservations at a motel?"

Abigail Waverly looked blank briefly, then turned to face me fully. "Not exactly a motel, Mr Mills. We operate a small guest house..."

"Er... I really can't impose on you..." I could see myself trapped into talking all night. They didn't seem the sort who would want more.

"I'm afraid the local motel is closed."

"I can drive to the one in Wilson's Crossing."

"Good heavens!" the president of the Ladies' Club broke in. "You don't know anything about that place, do you?"

I shook my head.

"It's a house of ill repute, I'll have you know. Anything goes in that place. They rent rooms to unmarried couples! The Waverly sisters operate a proper guest hotel, and that's the only fit place for a respectable gentleman to stay."

I was stuck. I followed the Waverly sisters' big Ford to a big, well-preserved old house. The neatly painted sign, "Lawrence Hotel," was reassuring, but I would have felt better if I had seen lights inside.

The place was a model of mid-century midwestern gentility. Flowered wallpaper covered the parlour walls; neat but slightly faded slipcovers covered the furniture. Not a thing was out of place; no sloppy pile of newspapers, or even a magazine open on an end table. It was the sort of place you see only in old pictures. I paused, looking for the stairs so I could plead tiredness and make a quick exit.

They didn't let me. "We're so pleased you could come, Mr Mills," said Abigail. "We've wanted to talk with you for a long time, about things that we couldn't mention at the meeting."

I must have shown some trace of my internal dismay. "Don't be afraid," Hester said. "We believe in the Brysst way. We just want to meet them."

I used my standard explanation, that I had to protect the privacy of the Brysst until they were ready to reveal themselves.

"This is something very different, Mr Mills," Abigail



explained as if to a child. "We also come from another planet. We were sent here to investigate your culture, without revealing ourselves. We didn't know the Brysst were here."

They were not the first, but my heart still skipped a beat. That craziness reminded me of the bad times with Melinda, or the sad old man who had walked up to me last year and said that aliens had given him a very important message, but he had lost it. I ignore letters from people claiming they are aliens, but I had no place to hide in the little guest house.

Abigail seemed as bewildered as I must have looked. "What's the matter?" she asked.

I groped for words. "I... I... can't bring you to them. The Brysst have to be very careful, you know. They're not prepared for full human contact."

"Do you understand that we are not human?" Hester asked.

I stepped back, uneasy at their closeness. "Can you prove it? You look quite human." At the end, Melinda had claimed the alien hippies were bioengineered to appear human, and could do everything a man or woman could. She'd blown her top when I asked how she knew.

"We are supposed to look human, although we – the entities you see before you – are only semi-autonomous biological constructs customized to survive on your planet. You can think of us as remote operating nodes, if you want, for the real aliens. Our race cannot survive physically on your planet. Our metabolisms are different; some organic compounds common in your environment are deadly toxins to our natural bodies."

There was a pause before Abigail added, "Our real bodies are in a shielded spacecraft outside the atmosphere. We operate these biological constructs by remote control, although they have enough autonomy to function credibly while signals travel back and forth, or during a brief communication failure, so they don't attract attention."

I looked back and forth between them, wondering if they were nuts or just playing a game. "Why do you want to meet the Brysst?" I asked, stalling.

"The same curiosity that brought us here. We have investigated many cultures on isolated planets, but we have never met another race that could travel between the stars."

"Mr Mills," Abigail began. "We've been here for over ten of your years, observing. We have collected many claims of alien visits, but only yours follows the pattern of truth. The claims of hostile aliens are bizarre, because no violent race can master interstellar flight. Your writings about the Brysst are different. You can contact them, can't you?"

"It takes time," I hedged, regretting that Melinda had ever convinced me to say that in the first book. Lies will always trap you, my mother had said every time she caught me, but I thought I had learned how to outsmart everyone else. "You are not the only people who claim to be aliens. You will have to convince me and then I will have to convince them." It was cruel, but I hoped it might stop them.

I had expected some hesitation, but there was none. "That is fair," said Abigail. "What kind of proof do you want?"

"Show me something non-human about you. Your mechanical insides, your spaceship, something like that."

"We are biological constructs, not mechanical. You would need very sophisticated medical tests to tell we are not human. But we can show you our lander. We hid it in a barn outside of town."

I had not expected them to call my bluff. Numbly, I followed them to their big old Ford. Abigail started the engine and drove quietly past dark houses into the country, crossing dark fields to a rutted dirt road that led to an old farmhouse and barn. The buildings sat in an overgrown patch in fields of soybeans; the moon and headlines tinted them ghostly pale. I doubted anyone had lived there in years.

"I'm sure you understand why we conceal this from the rest of the community, Mr Mills," Hester said as we emerged from the car. She led us to the barn with a flashlight, unlocked the big, rusty padlock that held the two doors shut, and opened one. Old red stain flaked from the wood.

I saw nothing in the musty interior until her flashlight beam swept across a large mound in the middle, covered by a tarp. I followed the light to a side wall, where wires led to a large electrical switch. Abigail switched it on, and I heard a grinding noise above me. The roof cracked open along the middle, and began sliding open to show the sky.

My eyes followed the beam back to the tarp. A thin dust of hay covered the dark mound. "This is our landing craft, Mr Mills. We bought this barn to keep it safely hidden, but ready if we need it. We can take you for a ride."

Mutely disbelieving, I nodded, and watched them pull the tarp off a genuine flying saucer at least 20 feet across. The outer surface was dull black, like the radar-suppressing Stealth coating I'd tested back in my laser days. A hatch popped open as we walked toward it.

Abigail climbed in first, then I, then Hester, whose flashlight gave the only illumination until Abigail touched something. A dim, even light diffused from overhead. Hester closed the hatch behind her. My eyes adapted slowly.

"This is only a simple lander," said one Waverly. "It takes us from the ground to our scout ship. We can do that tonight, but there is not enough time to see our interstellar explorer."

Neither NASA nor George Lucas had ever made anything as impressive as that lander. Multicolour displays covered the wall, like instruments in an airplane cockpit, but the flat panels were much bigger than anything I'd ever seen. I hadn't kept up with the state of the art, but this had to be beyond it. The patterns changed as the two busied themselves, then began flashing. They sat me in a chair, which clamped me in place, before sitting down themselves. I heard a low mechanical hum, and felt my seat vibrate lightly. Then the whole craft floated upward, as if someone had turned off the gravity.

It flew. With no wings or anything properly aerodynamic, it flew. It drifted upward, through the open roof of the barn, and hovered briefly while they checked the controls. Then we soared. I could feel the motion, and see it through windows that showed the moon and



stars. We flew over the rectangular grid of dim streetlights that was Lawrence. We flew higher, over patterns of lights that marked larger towns. "Des Moines," they announced over one; "Omaha," over a larger one we saw from higher in the sky. We zoomed upwards, higher than I had ever flown in a plane, high above the atmosphere itself. I saw vast areas of the rounded planet, like an astronaut in space shuttle.

We approached another black object that I could detect only when they showed me how it blocked part of the sky. I asked if anyone knew it was there, and they said that its black coating hid it from radar and visible observations. It was, I suppose, a kind of space station. The real aliens were inside, but we couldn't visit them. Each race gave off toxins that would kill the other, they said, and only the biological constructs that I called the sisters could speak human language. Our craft docked so we could see a small part of the station. The rest was alien territory, hermetically sealed against both the Earth and the vacuum.

I asked what the real aliens looked like. They showed me pictures of creatures with two arms, two legs, and a head, though the face was deformed by human standards, devoid of hair, with conical ears that tilted in different directions, and without anything I recognized as nostrils. They showed me maps of their sky and pictures of their planet, earthlike yet not earth. I asked more questions, my brain racing in overdrive, but I can remember few of my questions and fewer of their answers.

We were back at the barn by 4 a.m., in time to close the roof and drive back to their house. "Are you convinced?" asked one Waverly as we drove through the early morning darkness. "Will the Brysst be convinced?"

"Yes," was the only answer I could give. My mind was foggy from lack of sleep, but I knew I would have to say more. "The Brysst will have to council on it." Surely aliens would need time to decide how to deal with other aliens, whose presence they had not suspected before. I needed time. "It may take weeks or months."

"We understand," Abigail said as the car pulled into the drive. "It took us time to decide to contact you. Will you stay with us while they decide?"

I shook my head automatically. "I can't. I have other talks scheduled, and other commitments."

They looked at each other and agreed, then let me go to bed, where the note Melinda had left fluttered in my brief uneasy dreams: "I have to leave, Jack. I think we made a mistake."

When morning came, the sisters greeted me with a big bowl of hearty home-cooked oatmeal and a glass of milk. It reminded me of my maiden aunt's house in Glens Falls, where as a child I would hide from the busy world for a few days each summer. As I ate, they asked what the Brysst had said when I met them.

I swallowed the cereal and looked up at the sisters. The game was over. "I'm a fraud," I said flatly. "The Brysst are a hoax my ex cooked up. She took off and left me stuck with them. Without this con, I'd be flipping burgers somewhere."

The biological constructs stared immobile at me, not programmed to deal with such unwanted truths. Back

on the space ship, the real aliens must have been upset. I felt suspended in time as the sisters stared blankly; when one finally spoke, I felt freed.

"She must have known them. Where is she?"

There was no threat in the words, but I shivered. Were the aliens deaf to my words? Or was it I who had been deaf? Deaf to Melinda and only opening my ears to hear when they had shown me a reality I could not deny?

"Oregon," I said. Her note had said she was going back. She had shown me the town on a map, the one where once we had sat and traced the wanderings of our lives. It was in the Willamette Valley. She had said it was a beautiful place.

"Can you find her?"

"I don't know." Melinda could have wandered far in two years. I stopped before my mind could start down the well-worn path of excuses and lies. Only Melinda would know the truth, and I wanted to know it as much as the Waverlys did. "We'll have to try."

While the sisters brewed coffee for me, I left a message telling Angie to cancel the rest of the tour, and booked three seats on a flight to Oregon.

**Jeff Hecht** is a freelance science writer and is the Boston correspondent for *New Scientist* magazine. He has written nine non-fiction books, including one on the history of fibre-optics due from Oxford University Press in spring 1998. He has also contributed four short stories to *Analog* magazine, and has had various others published in American original anthologies. The above is his first piece for *Interzone*.

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# *The Eschatarium at Lyssia*

*Eric Brown*

Jonathon Fairman had worked all night on the sculpture, less from the artist's fastidious need to attain perfection than from a real fear of what sleep might bring. To work, to create something solid which before had not existed, was a far preferable option than to submit to the nightmares which had haunted his nights of late.

He reached out, felt the malleable wood begin to warm to his touch. He closed his eyes and concentrated, attempting to project the emotion which would bend the timber to the desired shape. He opened his eyes and watched the wood dimple beneath his finger-tips, then stepped back and viewed the piece as a whole. He could imagine the critics' reaction. They would declare that once again Jonathon Fairman had created a lasting work of art – and he had to admit that in form the piece was very nearly perfect. It showed the figure of a woman rising from the substance of the alien wood like someone emerging, explosively, from an ocean. It was the latest in a series of six he was in the process of completing; each showed a female figure – his wife, Aramantha – trying to escape from the medium of which she was forever a part. On the face of each sculpture could be seen an expression of increasing agony. Visually, the pieces were a success, but for Fairman they failed to work on the emotional level.

For perhaps the hundredth time that month he passed along the line of sculptures, pausing from time to time to caress a flank, a limb, to match his wife's star-spread fingers with his own – and each time, although he did feel deep within him some stirring of the emotion he had tried to communicate, the pieces added nothing, no deeper strata of feeling, to their visual aspect.

He had hoped that each might complement the other, that the viewer, after beholding the poignancy of Aramantha's attempt to escape, would be rocked, when touching the pieces, by the terror and the anguish. But

the emotional content of the sculptures was vapid, weak simulations of the emotions his wife had no doubt experienced. Oh, that might pass muster with critics who had never in their safe, cloistered existences experienced any emotion stronger than envy, but in his heart Fairman knew that he had failed to do justice to his wife's ultimate experience – and he knew, also, why. How could he ever hope to create a meaningful work of art from Aramantha's death when he had for so long denied the event?

He paced across the room and paused beneath the arching crystal dome that covered his penthouse studio. He stared through his grizzled reflection and looked out over the wings of his timber mansion to the greensward sloping towards the edge of the cliff, and the Pacific ocean beyond. Upon his return to Earth, Fairman had sought to sequester himself far from human habitation, away from prying eyes. He had almost succeeded.

As ever, though, a phalanx of floating cameras hovered, with mute mechanical propriety, just beyond the fence that demarcated his property. Trained his way, they hoped to catch a glimpse of him in the throes of creation. Beyond the fence, on the jade road, a small crowd of lost souls had gathered, as they did every day, in a bid to see the great artist taking a stroll around his grounds. Every day he took pleasure in disappointing them.

Two years ago he had returned from Tartarus to find himself fêted as one of the greatest artists in the Expansion. On Tartarus, for the past 40 years, he and Aramantha had shut themselves away on a remote island off the uninhabited western continent, turning out their respective works, despatching them to their agent on Earth, and ignoring all reviews and critical reaction good or bad. They had guessed that they were successful, or at least popular, by the size of the cheques



forwarded by their agent – monies which they had used to fund galleries and cultural galas on their adopted homeworld.

After Aramantha's death Fairman had fled to Earth, to what he hoped would be a quiet, anonymous life on the rugged coastline of the Pacific Northwest. But the illusion had been shattered by the battery of cameras and legion of reporters, both human and mechanical, awaiting him at the spaceport. He took refuge in the first mansion he found up for sale, occupied himself with his work and ignored all requests to appear in public.

Fairman yawned as a wave of fatigue swept over him. He crossed to the bureau, slid open a drawer and withdrew a small silver casket. He carefully opened the carved lid. A few grains of silverdrift had collected in the corners of the box – all that remained of the drug on which he was dependant, and not enough to dispel the dreams should he choose to sleep. For the past month he had rationed his nightly dose, to the point, for the past three nights, where the drug had been ineffective against the onslaught of the nightmare images.

A part of him knew that, for the good of his art, he should give rein to what the monsters of his subconscious were trying to tell him, but that part of him which wanted to retain its sanity cowered at the thought.

He was wondering what had delayed Karrel – he had promised to call at noon – when he recognized the gothic lines of his friend's customized flier in the air above the greensward.

He watched the artist land the vehicle on the deck outside the studio. Seconds later the young man stepped through the sliding door and stopped in his tracks, something histrionic in his affectation of surprise.

"Good God! You've actually... You said you were thinking of..." Words failing him, Karrel circled the six statues with the circumspection of someone afraid that they might come to life and flee. "Magnificent," he said beneath his breath.

Karrel was perhaps half Fairman's age, around 50, and still retained a youthful head of golden hair and handsome, well-defined features. He was a third-rate artist, very much in vogue, and he considered himself privileged to do Fairman's errands – even if those errands included supplying the famous artist with silverdrift.

Wide-eyed, Karrel looked across the studio at Fairman. He indicated the sculptures. "May I...?"

"If you must," Fairman muttered to himself, then aloud, "Why not?"

With reverence, with an almost palpable air of expectation that seemed to Fairman the next thing to parody, Karrel laid a hand on the first statue.

He closed his eyes. His features melted into an expression of rapture.

Fairman cleared his throat. He wanted nothing more than to get down to business.

Almost reluctantly, the younger artist withdrew his hand. "A masterpiece," he whispered. "Truly a masterpiece."

Fairman snorted. "I'm not happy with it. It's lacking something."

Karrel pouted judiciously. "Well... perhaps it *could* do with a little refinement, the slightest of tweaks?"

"A great twist, more like," Fairman said. "Anyway, less of that. How are you? Are you working –?"

"Never better, and I've landed the commission for the mural at the Diego starport –"

Fairman was nodding to himself. How such mundane trivialities – or rather the seriousness with which people took them – sickened him to his marrow.

"Speaking of which..." he said.

"Murals?"

"Starports."

Karrel looked uncomfortable. He dabbed at his nose with a perfumed kerchief, feigning interest in the last statue.

Fairman had entrusted the artist to obtain not just his usual monthly supply of silverdrift, but two kilos. That much would last him for five years, and no one addicted to the drug had survived any longer.

"Well?" Fairman demanded.

"I'm afraid there was a slight – how shall I put it? – *difficulty*."

"You failed to obtain a bulk consignment?"

"You might say that," Karrel murmured. "Not that I didn't try. Just last week my contact at the 'port promised me the two kilograms."

"So how much did you manage to get?" Fairman asked.

Karrel shook his head. "I'm sorry. I... I made alternative enquiries. There are other drugs, miracle philtres that will provide the same relief as silverdrift."

"You are mistaken, my friend. There is no substitute for 'drift. I've tried everything from natural drugs to manufactured substances." He paused. "How much did you obtain?"

"My contact could lay his hands on not one grain. The danger involved... The TWC authorities have declared the drug a banned substance." Karrel stood beside the statues, seventh in line and just as immobile.

Fairman found a chair and sat down, a finger to his lips. What a fine irony it was that Tartarus was the sole source of silverdrift. If only he had known, when resident on Tartarus, that one day he would be dependant on the drug...

"Very well. No doubt you did your best." His calm words did not reflect his mental turmoil.

Karrel ventured a smile. "In the event, it might prove a blessing. Silverdrift kills. In five years... The galaxy cannot afford to lose an artist of your standing."

Fairman wanted to tell the man to shut up. Karrel did not have the merest inkling of what the 'drift meant to him, how only the nightly balm of the cool sparkling powder made his existence bearable.

Instead, he merely gestured wearily. "Forgive me, Karrel. I have work to do." He indicated the line of statues.

Karrel backed from the chamber, promising that he would look in upon Fairman at the soonest, that if he should need anything, anything at all...

Then he was gone. Fairman heaved a great sigh.

He positioned his chair before the curving face of the dome and stared out at the early evening landscape. The sun was setting on the oceanic horizon, laying



down strata of orange and scarlet cloud formations. The red dome of the sun reminded him of the coming night.

He wondered how he might see it through with no 'drift to assuage his fevered mind.

He had at one time considered doing without the drug voluntarily, so that he would become cognizant of the terrors of his past that were locked within his subconscious. He was an artist, was he not? Why keep that great storehouse of a myriad inspirations locked – even if its content proved too harrowing to bear? If he was to produce art out of life, which after all should be the tenet of all great artists, then surely all experience was valid?

But over the months his nightmares had grown ever more terrible, and he found himself unable to cope with the ghastly images within his head. He had steadily increased his intake of silverdrift, until a week ago when it began to run low and he had had to ration himself.

Three nights ago, on a quarter of his usual dosage, he had been tortured by a procession of unbearable visions. All featured Aramantha in agony, begging him not to let her die. In the nightmare he had been visited by pangs of guilt almost physical in their agony. He'd awoken screaming, covered in sweat, still haunted by visions of Aramantha, their villa on Tartarus, and the rugged Grecian landscape of the island.

Two nights ago he had dreamed that he himself had brought about Aramantha's death, and a sense of guilt had haunted him all the following day.

Last night he had remained awake, working, determined not to give in to sleep. He wondered now if he could remain awake a second night, or a third? And how soon might it be before his subconscious unburdened its freight of anguish upon his conscious self in the form of hypnagogic hallucinations just as terrible as his nightmares?

A little over two years ago Aramantha had contracted a rare terminal disease, and had spent her final months on the island with Fairman. A week after her death, Fairman had left Tartarus and fled to Earth. Then, not long after his arrival, he had employed the services of a neuro-surgeon to edit his memories of Aramantha's illness. The agony, obviously, had been too much to bear.

The process was illegal – for obvious reasons. Memories could never be comprehensively erased. Sooner or later they re-emerged, warped and deformed, as Fairman's were doing now.

A part of him was curious to know exactly what had happened during Aramantha's last months – even though he was aware he would probably regret the knowledge; after all, he had thought it wise to have it edited in the first place. The note he had written to himself had informed him of all he thought he should know: "Aramantha died on Tartarus on the 40th of St Jude's month. You had your memory wiped of this, to save your sanity. Let it be."

As the sun sank from sight and the stars appeared in the night sky one by one, Fairman repeatedly caught himself on the brink of sleep. He awoke for perhaps the fifth time with a start, and was wondering how he might keep himself awake when he became aware of a dark shape against the luminous starfield.

At first he thought it was yet another of the floating cameras, though larger. Then he saw that it had wings. Could it be the latest creation of one of the gene-artisans who lived a hundred kilometres down the coast, a DNA-created replica of a bald eagle or condor, extinct these past thousand years?

Then, as the creature drew closer, his heart began a laboured pounding. He realized that he was sweating. There could be no doubting it – unless this was just another peculiar facet of his dreams: the creature advancing through the air towards his mansion was none other than a Tartarean Messenger. He experienced a quick stab of panic at the sight of the creature, and wondered why? *Why?*

The delicate Messenger descended to the deck and hovered an inch above the surface, its great wings a blur of shimmering motion. It proceeded in light, tip-toe steps towards the entrance, its long wings coming together behind its back.

It spoke into the receiver, "Monsieur Fairman?" Its voice was light, piping.

Fairman cleared his throat. "The same. Your duty?" "To relay to you a message."

He hesitated. "From Tartarus?"

The Messenger blinked. It was bald, as pure in facial feature as a child. It wore a silver bodysuit, from the shoulder blades of which its wings sprouted on wrist-thick columns of cartilage. The wings themselves were not feathered, but as diaphanous as fine lace, like those of a dragonfly.

"Where else?" the Messenger responded at last. "Perhaps, if you let me in, we might talk further?"

Fairman spoke, and the door slid open. The Messenger stepped through, followed by the length of its wings. The creature stood within reach of Fairman before the transparent membranes, fully five metres long, cleared the entrance. This close, he was amazed at how small the creature was – the apex of its shaven pate barely reached his chest.

For all he knew the Messenger to be of human stock, there was something nevertheless alien about it: the pale skin, large eyes and thin-lipped mouth – though, at the same time, it was not without a strange, ascetic beauty. Fairman detected the slight rise of breasts beneath the bodysuit; it was female, then.

"I come from Tartarus; generally, from the western continent, specifically from the isle of Lyssia."

Fairman experienced a second's disbelief. "I lived there," he whispered; then quickly, "Who sent you?"

"I was summoned by the ghost of your wife, Monsieur Fairman."

"No!" What cruel joke was being played on him? "My wife?"

"She haunts the western peninsula of the isle. I was traversing the archipelago when she manifested herself and called a summons. Messengers ignore no summons, especially those of a ghost."

Fairman was shaking his head. The western peninsula? He recalled the amphitheatre, what he and Aramantha had seen and heard there. Could it be? His heart leaped at the thought.

"Aramantha wishes to talk to you," the Messenger said.

He considered Aramantha, her alleged ghost. Then



it came to him that on the island neighbouring Lyssia was a forest of silver trees...

"But a ship - ?" he began.

"Boats leave Diego daily, bound for Tartarus," the Messenger said. "I have made arrangements."

"And you?"

"I will accompany you, of course. It is my destiny to go with the glory of Tartarus when the sun blows in 20 years."

Fairman looked across the studio at the six statues. "Give me a little time. I have one or two tasks to complete."

The Messenger inclined her head. She turned, mindful of her wings, and processed herself through the exit.

Fairman approached the sculptures. He would meld them back into the block from which they had come. He did not wish these sub-standard pieces to stand as his last work, should tragedy befall him on Tartarus.

The landing on Tartarus suggested that much had changed. In the past the transition from omega-space to planetary atmosphere had been achieved without the passengers' realization. This time, the ancient barque bucked and juddered as it entered the orbit of Tartarus, then was rattled almost to the point of disintegration by the planet's overheated troposphere. The touchdown itself seemed more of a drop from a great height, which jarred Fairman's bones and left the ship creaking ominously.

An even greater shock was in store when the ramp was lowered and the passengers, with Fairman and the tiny Messenger in their wake, swarmed out. The surrounding hills of Baudelaire, once emerald green, were parched and straw-coloured now.

In the sky, dominating and oppressing the landscape, was the cause. The sun - once the size of an orange held at arm's length - filled a quarter of the heavens, a blinding white disc.

Fairman selected a flier from the port hire service, and hoisted it into the searing, white expanse of the sky and banked away in the direction of the western continent. The Messenger insisted on accompanying him in the flier. The creature claimed it was her duty to take him to she who had summoned him, and though Fairman wished to travel alone - something about the Messenger still troubling him - he was too exhausted to argue after the uncomfortable voyage, too apprehensive as to what he might find on the island.

They flew over the sluggish sea of Mareia, the equatorial ocean that stretched for 2,000 kilometres between the densely populated landmass they had just left and the sequestered western continent of Kithira. The heat was such that the sea gave off foul-smelling veils of steam; it seemed that the higher they flew, the hotter the air became, and Fairman chose to keep the flier at low altitude, preferring the reeking discharge to the wilting heat.

Fairman reclined on the comfortable control couch before the bulbous viewscreen, the side-panels open to admit what little breeze their passage generated. He had to fight to keep from falling asleep; repeatedly he awoke with a start and busied himself needlessly with minor adjustments to the controls.

Although sedated for the three day duration of the

voyage, he had managed only a few hours of genuine sleep, and predictably these were haunted by familiar images. Prominent were those of his wife, her handsome Latin features twisted into a mask of agony, her body, once fulsome, reduced now to parlous skin and bone. More terrifying had been the mental anguish that Fairman had experienced: the sense of guilt, of hopelessness and grief that had threatened to take his sanity. At the culmination of each dream sequence, Fairman had struggled from the cloying effects of the sedation like someone attempting to claw their way from quicksand, only to be sucked back in to suffer another bout of mental anguish. He had awoken finally just before transition, and the realization of where he was, and the promise of the silverdrift, had served to push back the horror and give him hope.

The Messenger perched beside him on the passenger's couch, her wings arranged awkwardly down the length of the flier. She leaned forward, her posture suggesting an attitude of observation, an eagerness to arrive at journey's end.

They had spoken hardly a word to each other since their communication at his mansion. Fairman had wanted to ask her more about her meeting with Aramantha's ghost, but had found the creature's silence, her absorption in a reality that seemed at many removes from his own, a powerful deterrent to enquiry.

Now, as a roundabout way of finding out what he wanted to know, he determined to ask the creature about herself.

"Why is it that your Guild has vowed to remain on Tartarus?"

The Messenger turned her large dark eyes on him, as if deciding whether she should deign to reply.

"We were created to communicate," she said, ambiguously.

"Yes, but why - ?"

"In the early days we were created to act as liaisons between the many castes of colonists who were forbidden, for reasons of etiquette, to speak to each other. Our wings, our eidetic memories, were designed to aid this function."

"And when the castes were no more?"

"There were always tasks we could perform. Many of my forbears were bards, poets, reciters of the Tartarean sagas."

"And then, with the swelling of the sun, you again come into your own."

"That is so. And when the sun explodes, we will effect the final communication."

Fairman stared at the childlike Messenger. "How so?"

"On the day before the apocalypse we will gather at prearranged sites around Tartarus and end our lives of flesh. Then, when the sun blows, our collective consciousness will be fired outwards, our atoms will commingle with the cosmos, communicating with all sentient life in the galaxy, telling of our sacrifice, our elevation." The creature fell silent, as if contemplating this hallowed event.

Fairman shook his head, but remained silent. He wanted to point out to the fey being just what would happen, come the day of destruction. First, the breathable atmosphere of the planet would be burned up by the intensifying heat of the sun, the seas would boil and



evaporate and all organic matter would ignite in a world-wide conflagration; then the photon sleet of the exploding sun would blast all that remained from the planet's surface.

But he kept silent. The Messenger believed, and who was he to gainsay such faith with his cynical rationalizations?

If such things as ghosts did, indeed, exist...

Quite suddenly the mist lifted, and ahead Fairman made out the rocky bastion of Kithira's coastline. Inland, a spectacular range of mountains rose against the great white orb of the sun. Fairman set the flier on a course parallel to the shore, heading towards the southern seas where the continent stuttered to an end in a diminishing chain of archipelagic islets.

He cleared his throat. "You said you were summoned by the ghost of Aramantha? How did this happen?"

The creature spread her delicate fingers. "In ages past, long before humans came to Tartarus, long before even the Slarque walked the planet, others lived here, aliens from another star – the Tharseans. They did not die as we do, but lived on as ghosts – or rather, as what we call ghosts. The phantoms of this alien race still live here, and occasionally they are joined by human ghosts, chosen by the legion of the Tharseans. Aramantha Fairman is one such."

"And this... this ghost – it summoned you?"

"She summoned me, said that she wished to speak with you. That is all I know." The Messenger fell silent.

Fairman sat back in his couch and contemplated what she had said. He considered Aramantha, and what they had witnessed, more than once, on the island where they had made their home.

Almost every evening, after a long day's work, they would take bread and cheese, fruit and wine, and leave the villa. They would walk until they reached a suitable location, and eat and drink and enjoy the view, talk about their work and what they hoped to produce.

A favourite place, to which they returned again and again, was the amphitheatre on the western peninsula, a fan-shaped banking of marble-like tiers overlooking the performance area beside the sea. The amphitheatre pre-dated the Slarque, and was said to be the work of the aliens who had made Tartarus their home aeons ago.

The mystique of the place was emphasized by the fact, or so Aramantha had claimed, that it was haunted. On perhaps a dozen occasions during their 40 years on the island they had heard strange sounds issue from the performance area of the amphitheatre – the occasional cry, of pain or joy they could not tell, a string of what might have been words in an unknown language, lofty and declarative, and once, briefly, the sound of someone or something weeping. At least, Aramantha had anthropomorphized them so. Although Fairman had heard them too, he had rationalized the sounds, ascribed them to freak effects of the wind, or the amplification of an animal noise by the excellent acoustics of the ruin. And anyway, the incidents had been so infrequent, and then so brief, that Fairman had tended to pay them little attention beside the all-consuming passion for his wife and his work.

Harder to explain away, however, were the visual

manifestations witnessed by Aramantha and himself. On two occasions – and these 20 years apart – they had both become aware of a fleet, shifting form in the warm night air. The first time, while drinking wine in the upper tiers of the amphitheatre, they had turned as one, just in time to see a rapid blur vanish from sight down in the performance area. Fairman had managed to convince himself that what he had seen was nothing more than either the movement of a wild animal, or a dust-devil created by the warm night winds that came in off the sea.

The second incident had been more difficult to dismiss. They had approached the amphitheatre from the beach, a little drunk with wine, and stopped dead before they reached the performance area. To their right had appeared briefly – for perhaps five seconds, no more – a flickering, humanoid form, an arm raised in a gesture of valediction. Then it vanished, and Fairman and Aramantha had stared at each other as if to corroborate what each had seen.

"The wine," he had muttered to himself.

And down the years, while Fairman had tended to minimize the import of the apparition – citing scientific rationalizations like hallucinations or sympathetic mental imagery – Aramantha convinced herself that the amphitheatre was indeed haunted. She had even produced a performance piece entitled, "The Phantom of the Isle."

And now, if the Messenger was to be believed, she had returned herself as a phantom.

They sped south, on a course parallel with the coast. The inland mountains gave way to broad plains, once green but burned ochre now by the ministrations of the sun. The gentle sea lapped at isolated coves and beaches, incessant activity that had gone on from time immemorial, and which few human eyes had seen – and which, in 20 years, would be no more. Such beauty, Fairman thought, such innocent beauty destroyed by unimaginably vast forces.

The sun was a vast, nebulous orb balanced on the horizon. It was setting, though the process would take hours, and in its wake would not come night as such but a bloody and baleful twilight. Fairman felt himself nodding off, but fought the urge.

Hours later, the flier on automatic, he did finally doze, only to be awoken after what seemed like minutes by a frightful nightmare image. He thrust a dagger into Aramantha's heart, and then stood back in horror, while all around him in the amphitheatre spectators denounced him as a traitor.

He sat upright with a small cry, and was rewarded by the sight of the archipelago ahead, a series of evenly spaced islands diminishing over the bow of the sea. The panorama, a duplication of the scene he had beheld many times over the years, brought tears to his eyes.

He lowered the flier so that it was wave-hopping, and one by one passed the uninhabited islands, dark against the broad disc of the setting sun. Two hours later he came upon the penultimate island of the archipelago. He decelerated, planed the flier in across a sheltered cove and settled it on the beach.

The Messenger frowned at the island. "But this is not Lyssia," she said.



"No – there is... I have business to complete here, before..." Reluctant to discuss his addiction with the Messenger, he quickly pulled two canisters from beneath the couch. He set off up the beach, towards the forest which covered the island.

The heat of the sun scorched his skin and seared his lungs with every breath. He recalled the long evenings he had spent with Aramantha on their island, the cooling sea breezes which had tempered the heat of the day.

It was quiet within the forest, and cooler; high overhead the foliage filtered the light into slanting columns, through which motes of sparkling dust eddied and swirled on their lazy descent from the silver trees to the forest floor. Fairman took a deep breath, and was aware almost instantly of the intoxicating effect of the unprocessed drug. The dust coated the mucous membranes of his nose and mouth with a sweet, perfumed taste, rich with the promise of dream-free sleep.

He and Aramantha had taken their boat to this island perhaps once a year, stayed for a day and night during which they had swum in the rock pools, made love on the moss-carpeted forest floor, and become blissfully high on the air-borne stimulant. Taken this way, so infrequently, it was neither addictive nor harmful.

He came upon a shallow dell in the forest, filled with a drift of the silver spores. He knelt and scooped handfuls into the canisters. The dust coruscated in his palm, reflecting the light of the setting sun like diamond filings. He filled the canisters and replaced their caps. He judged that he had sufficient silverdrift to last him five years. His only thought was that it would make his existence bearable again, his nights tolerable... So what if in five, six years the cumulative effect of the substance would rot the synapses of his brain, scale the byways of his ganglia with its virulent chemical crud, and bring about motor neurone dysfunction and rapid death?

He returned to the beach and stowed away the canisters, the Messenger watching him with a neutral expression. He lifted the flier and headed across the sea towards Lyssia. Within minutes, emotion blocking his throat, he powered up the white beach and came to a halt outside the studio-villa he had shared with Aramantha.

He climbed out and stood in the fine sand, staring up at the two-tier edifice. The Messenger was beside him, yawning and stretching, luxuriating in the heat of the sun.

"The ghost is –"

"I know," Fairman snapped. "In the amphitheatre."

The Messenger stared at him with wide eyes, then nodded silently.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I'd rather be alone." Before she could reply, he set off up the sloping beach towards the villa, relieved that the Messenger made no move to follow him.

He walked through the rose garden, neglected and overgrown these past two years, and climbed the steps to the second-level deck. The sliding door was not locked. He passed inside.

Unable to recall how he had left the villa, he had expected bare rooms made anonymous by the removal or storage of their possessions. He was shocked to find

that the room was as he recalled it from when he had lived here. He looked about him, saw a few of Aramantha's favourite pieces – a portrait of herself she had commissioned from a friend, a landscape of Tartarus they had both loved. The sight of these objects now brought back a flood of painful memories. He realized that all that was missing from the scene was Aramantha herself.

He hurried quickly through the lounge and into his old studio. This room was bare, empty. He had taken his own tools and materials with him to Earth; Aramantha had worked in another studio on the ground floor. He resolved not to revisit that room.

He took the spiral staircase to the garden behind the house – the sloping rockery in which Aramantha had lovingly reared her favourite blooms. He strolled up the zigzag path, and at the top of the garden sat down on the bench which overlooked the villa and, beyond it, the sea.

How many times had they sat side by side on this very bench, discussing life, their work, art in general? Now Aramantha's absence was hard to bear, a physical pain within his chest. He could hear her voice, smell her scent, see her face radiant in the light of the setting sun. He was aware that his cheeks were wet with tears.

One of his final memories of Aramantha was of her returning from her physician in Baudelaire. For months previously she had complained of listlessness, frequent migraines, and eventually she had set aside her natural mistrust of the medical profession and, on Fairman's behest, consulted a doctor.

The diagnosis was that she was suffering from a rare neurological disease – Fairman could not recall the precise nature of her illness, as he had had this edited from his memory – and had only months to live. It had been a vicious blow that came at them without warning; they had been looking forward to another 50 years in each other's company. They had never even dreamed of one being parted from the other, still less parted by a fatal disease in this relatively disease-free age.

Two months after the diagnosis, Aramantha had died, though he retained memories only of the first month. It had been a limbo period of disbelief, of anger and grief. They had had to readjust themselves to the knowledge of her eventual end, redefine their relationship. Fairman had been solicitous of and cosseting to his sick wife – which Aramantha had not wanted. In death, as in life, she demanded to be treated as an equal, with no sympathy, no special pleading or dispensations. Fairman recalled that she had worked hard on her final project, which she had kept secret from him with the promise that she would tell him what she was doing in due course. But if she had ever let him in on her secret, then he'd had that wiped from his consciousness too.

Not for the first time he wondered why he had undergone the memory erasure programme. He had loved Aramantha as he had loved no one else, and the knowledge of her illness had nearly destroyed him – but others had suffered the loss of loved ones without resorting to memory erasure. He had lived all his adult life with the philosophy that if he was to strive to create art from the reality around him, then all experience was valid. Why had he not learned from the tragedy, transcended



Aramantha's death and grown in mental stature like the artist he claimed to be? What had been so terrible about his wife's end that he should have had it excised from his mind?

He stood suddenly and walked from the garden, up the incline to the greensward that was the highest point on the island. It was a stroll of 30 minutes to the coast and the amphitheatre there, but Fairman made it in half the time. The combination of exertion and anticipation, and the heat, had him sweating as he came upon the amphitheatre, paused on the top tier and stared down into the performance area. He could almost make-believe that Aramantha was at his side, sharing the magnificence of the view.

He recalled the phenomena he and Aramantha had witnessed here all those years ago. More than anything he wanted to accept that somehow, in some way, his beloved had outlived death – but how could he forego the tenets of a life of rationalism because now, in extremis, some bereaved part of his psyche needed to believe in the impossible?

He walked down the tiered steps, taking the descent with care. The temperature had increased, as if the shape of the amphitheatre had captured and contained the heat, like a cauldron. Ahead, the upper hemisphere of the setting sun spanned the embrasure between the headlands.

He reached the performance area, then stood still, a lone actor on an empty stage awaiting the rise of the curtain. He looked about him, at the dizzying incline of the tiers on three sides. He felt as though he was being watched by a thousand invisible spectators.

He realized then that he was weeping, and when he spoke his voice cracked with emotion. "Aramantha?"

He turned at the suggestion of some sound behind him, and tried to focus on the air between him and the banked tiers. The feeling that he was being watched intensified.

"Jonathon..." The sound reached his ears softly, the merest breath.

He spun around, seeing nothing. "Aramantha!"

"You have come."

He said her name again. He stared at a point in the air three metres before him, from where he imagined the voice had issued.

And there, before the rising tiers, Fairman made out a shimmering, insubstantial form – that, unmistakably, of a woman. Although the strata of the tiers could be seen through the phantom figure, he could make out the strong, handsome features, the piled dark hair, of Aramantha.

She shimmered before him, an arm outstretched.

"Jonathon – you came. I wished to talk to you, to ensure that you were well, that I was happy." Her voice, exactly as he remembered it, echoed in the air around him, as if emanating from the stones of the amphitheatre.

Fairman regained control of his breathing. He found his voice. "What... what are you?"

The ghost laughed, the sound so familiar. "Jonathon, Jonathon... you were always the rationalist. You could never bring yourself to believe in the ghosts that haunted this arena." Aramantha gestured, a quick

spreading of her fingers he recalled so well.

"What am I? Am I a ghost? Am I the Aramantha you loved and lost?" Her expression, hovering before him like a faded super-imposition over the tiers, frowned as if in concentration.

"Strictly speaking, I am not Aramantha – but a continuation of her. I have her memories, her personality and beliefs."

"I don't understand."

"Then again," the phantom went on, seeming to ignore him, "perhaps I am Aramantha. How does one distinguish between an individual entity like your living wife, and something that is an exact copy which began where the original left off?"

"You're speaking in riddles!" Fairman cried.

Aramantha – he could call the spectre by no other name – sighed. She gestured around her at the amphitheatre. "This place, and others like it across Tartarus, was built millions of years ago by the Tharseans. You recall the myths, the tales told by the Messengers of the proud star-faring race that rose to prominence and became extinct before Earth even came into existence. They built many wonders on many worlds, but perhaps none so great as this..." She paused. "I suppose you could call it an *eschatarium*. This is a place where the dead come back to life – or at least where the identities of the dead are stored, living out their own abstract existences."

"Here?"

"In the very fabric of the stones which constitute the arena is enmeshed a technology so miniature as to be undetectable by the clumsy sciences of humanity. This is where the dead of the Tharseans reside. You and I witnessed these phantoms, though much faded and atrophied by the passage of time. The aliens brought their loved ones here to die, and duly they were absorbed into the technology of the amphitheatre, granted an extended existence – depending, of course, upon one's beliefs."

Fairman was shaking his head. "I... I find it all very hard to believe."

Aramantha spread her arms wide, a shaft of dying sunlight falling through her torso. "Believe," she said. "Behold and believe."

Fairman stared at her shimmering form. He said at last, "The Tharseans brought their loved ones here to die? Then how did you come to be...?"

"I was lucky, Jonathon. The play – my final performance."

He echoed her words.

She laughed. "Surely you cannot have forgotten? The event we enacted upon this stage? The last act of *Julius and Hippolyte*."

"Aramantha... when I returned to Earth, the grief... it was obviously too much for me to bear." And he told her of how he had had his memory of her final weeks erased from his consciousness.

He shook his head, some detail beyond his understanding. "But if I agreed to enact the sequence with you..." He recalled the scene in the Martian epic, in which Julius passed his dying lover the chalice of poison. Presumably, then, he had played this part in Aramantha's ultimate performance. He could understand that he would have been duly grief-stricken – but to the



extent where he would have had the memory wiped from his mind? "If I agreed to take the part of Julius, why did I have the memory wiped?"

Aramantha was shaking her head. "Jonathon, Jonathon... What torture you must have passed through before the memory erasure."

"But why? I don't understand! Why could I not live with the memory, grieve and come to some reconciliation of what had happened? Surely to have you take the poison was preferable to seeing you waste away in pain?"

Aramantha was regarding him with dark, compassionate eyes. "Jonathon – I think that it was not what happened in this arena that you wished to forget, but what transpired later."

His mouth was dry. "What?" he managed at last.

Aramantha said, "What do you recall, Jonathon? What is your last memory of our time together?"

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. "You were ill – very ill. It was a month after the diagnosis. I was nursing you. On good days we'd sit in the garden and talk. You were planning some new project, but you wouldn't tell me what." He could not go on without weeping. He let the silence lengthen, then said, "That's my last recollection of our time together – sitting in the garden."

Aramantha smiled at him. "I decided that I didn't want to let the disease run its course. I didn't want to waste away, physically and mentally. *Julius and Hippolyte* has always been one of my favourites, and its theme of love, illness and mortality seemed suited to my situation. I told you what I wanted – to enact the final scene, just the two of us in the amphitheatre, and you agreed. We prepared for a week. We decided not to record this particular performance, that it would be our own private affair. We chose a day, and that day came and we played out the scene. You passed me the chalice and I drank, and I died in your arms, and yet miraculously I did not die. I was... reborn, renewed, without the pain that had racked me so. I was the first sentient being to take advantage – albeit unwittingly – of the eschatarium for millennia. I became part of a... I suppose you could call it a memory bank, stocked with the identities of the Tharseans, alien but so similar to humans in many respects. By the time I learned to manifest myself, days later, I saw your flier leave the island. I was inconsolable. You had said you would stay on until the final evacuation, and I had hoped that you might revisit the amphitheatre so that we might be reunited. Only later did I find out why you left so soon...

"We are in contact with the Messengers, and one of their guild told me what had occurred to make you flee the planet so precipitously."

Fairman felt weak. "What happened?" he asked.

"Two days after my death, a Messenger arrived at the villa, from Baudelaire. A solar pulse had made radio communications impossible. The Messenger had a communiqué from my physician, regarding my diagnosis. My doctor had sent my case notes and biopsies off-planet, seeking a second opinion. A doctor on Avalon, a specialist in xeno-biological maladies, questioned my physician's findings, suggested that I had a less severe form of the disease which might respond well to treat-

ment. The Messenger had come to tell me to return immediately to Baudelaire, to begin the cure. Of course, by this time it was too late. When you heard what the Messenger had come to tell you..."

Aramantha reached out a hand to him. "Jonathon, my poor Jonathon. Is it any wonder you left Tartarus, had your memories erased?"

Fairman found his way to the nearest tier and sat down. He could not recall what the Messenger had told him, of course, could not recall the grief and pain he must have experienced then – but on hearing now what had happened, two years ago, he realized the anguish he must have suffered, understood now the terrible irony of their tragedy.

Aramantha reached out to him, her hand passing through his arm. Fairman told himself that he detected warmth.

"Jonathon, do not grieve. See for yourself, look at me – can you deny that I am reborn? I live, Jonathon, I experience. Rejoice in that fact!"

He smiled. He tried to see past his own loss and apprehend Aramantha's resurrection.

"But when the sun blows –" he began.

Aramantha was smiling. "Oh, no, Jonathon. We cannot be harmed by the nova. The technology that gives us awareness is so small that it cannot be affected by the cataclysm. We will ride forever through the galaxy on a wondrous wave of light –"

Fairman stared at her. "With the guild of Messengers?" he asked.

"With the guild," she said, "and whoever else wishes to join us."

Fairman returned to the beach.

The Messenger was perched upon the hood of the flier, flexing her great gossamer membranes. They swept back and forth and Fairman was fanned by wafts of warm, displaced air.

"You found your wife?" the Messenger asked.

"I found her ghost," he replied.

"And?" The creature regarded him, head cocked. "Will you be joining us in our glorious ascent?"

Without answering, Fairman turned and stared across the ocean. The sun had set, and overhead the night sky flickered with the vestiges of its fiery radiation.

He had pondered long after the phantom's request, but something had made him decline her offer, some residual cynicism, or perhaps cowardice, or even the desire to create a work of art to stand as a statement of what he had learned in the amphitheatre.

On beating wings, the Messenger rose vertically into the air, legs dangling. "Farewell, Fairman," she called.

He waved. "Farewell, Messenger."

He watched the creature rise into the air until she was no more than a tiny crucifix, riding high. Then he boarded the flier, turned it on its axis and headed out to sea, a scintillating cloud of silverdrift trailing in his wake.

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**Eric Brown**, one of our most frequent contributors, has a children's sf novel forthcoming from Orion Publishers. His last book was the collection *Blue Shifting* (Pan, 1996).





## Long Live the New Flesh!

Paul J. McAuley

first colonists at the heart of the world, *Chimera's Cradle*. After many adventures, aided by a variety of indigenous intelligences, the expedition has split into three parts but has finally won through to the centre of the transformative powers which are reshaping the world.

Nothing is as expected. The soldier-of-fortune, Andris Myrasol, discovers a strange wood where the Tree of Knowledge might be found, but is himself transformed into one of the trees; he becomes the object of his quest. The agents of change are discovered to be flowing stones vast as countries, which reshape clades of creatures to enact an eternal struggle for dominance. The Snakes and Salamanders are creatures of this struggle, being able to reproduce in juvenile form for most of the time, but reaching adult form during the Times of Emergence. And the rest of the expedition finally reaches Idun, the garden where the forefathers reshaped their children, and learn how the colonization of the world went awry, and how humanity might survive.

The *Genesys Trilogy* is a powerful and sweeping novel of ideas, with the underlying theme that a kind of unifying pattern may emerge from chaotic or random interactions echoed in the apparently picaresque quest. But it is not an immediately engaging work; Stableford does not compromise the intensity of his philosophical investigations with base considerations of plot tension and resolution. His wry and sardonic prose is set at an unvarying and formally mannered pitch, useful in unpicking the trilogy's metaphysical arguments but too often defusing the excitement of the quest's many adventures and violent clashes. And time and again the narrative founders on reefs of explication.

Ideas are conveyed not by discovery but by revelation; as the mystery unravels, characters increasingly begin to resemble each other as they explain to one another in perfectly formed paragraphs the significance

of their deductions, as if they are pedagogues in a university common room rather than desperate adventurers in fear of their lives. The strand of the complex plot which works best is Andris's, for we are shown rather than told how he works out the nature of his unusual predicament and the possibilities it opens up.

As one of the characters observes, this is not a simple romance in which evil personified is identified, confronted and destroyed. And although with its quest by colourful and variously motivated characters across strange landscapes it resembles an epic fantasy, at its heart it is a romance of science (and so, for instance, the witch's "magic" is founded on toxicology), an ambitious and detailed piece of world-building based on particular and painstaking extrapolations from evolutionary biology. After the long build-up of the quest, one might have hoped for a more dramatic and cohesive conclusion (and one suspects that Stableford has deliberately confounded that expectation), but at least two of the characters, Andris and the merchant (who is given a fine closing speech), reach satisfactory individual apotheoses, and there is considerable power in Stableford's intelligent expansion and exploration of novel yet convincing ideas in a wonderfully realized setting.

Miscegenation at the fringes of biology and computer technology has produced the new science of Artificial Life, and Rudy Rucker is one of AL's maverick gurus. *Freeware* (Avon, \$13), a tasty brew of slacker society and weird science, is an AL sf novel that continues the story of the symbiotic conflict between humans and robots previously chronicled in *Software* and *Wetware*.

By now, the robots have become moldies, for they and all electronic-based technology have been transformed by imipolex, a quasi-living soft plastic ripe with gengineered moulds and algae which was developed by free robots on the Moon; the boundary between software and life has been blurred. Although superior in many ways to humans, for they are more intelligent and their bodies can be reshaped in a variety of ways, the moldies' appetite for imipolex, which they need to revitalize themselves and to make their children, keeps them subservient. Moldies and humans exist in an uneasy mutual dependence: moldies can manipulate humans using their superior intelligence, and even make humans into slaves by inserting a thinking cap inside their skulls; humans control the imipolex supply and can sap the freewill of moldies by slapping on living software patches.

Just two branches of science, information technology and genetics, dominate social and cultural change in the late 20th century. In the 1980s, cyberpunk reflected the importance of information technology. In the 1990s, sf reflects the increasing dominance of the New Biology, from Paul Di Filippo's biopunk fictions (cyberpunk described ways of positively enhancing the body by mechanical or silicon chip implants; biopunk examines a more fundamental consumerist option, change not just of our bodies but of our cells) to radical reappraisals of the extremes of ecological and evolutionary theory.

One of the foremost practitioners of the New Biology is Brian Stableford. His short-story collection *Sexual Chemistry* prefigured the new wave of biological sf, and his *Genesys Trilogy*, of which *Chimera's Cradle* (Legend, £16.99) is the final volume, turns on exploration of a radically different kind of evolutionary paradigm.

The forefathers of the colonists of the world modified human stock by addition of genes taken from indigenous Serpents and Salamanders to enable their children to survive in the alien ecosystem. But now that ecosystem is undergoing one of its periodic upheavals, a Time of Emergence that occurs once every thousand years, and the consequences for the colonists are unknown because records have dwindled to the much disputed Lore of Genesys and its Apocrypha.

An expedition led by a merchant, and also including a soldier-of-fortune prince from a distant empire, a master-thief, a witch and her princess pupil, has set off towards the legendary city of Idun, which is supposed to have been built by the



The rambling recursive narrative starts out in Santa Cruz, a laidback surfer community north of San Francisco, where Monique, a moldie motel maid, is kidnapped by a lowlife human, Randy Karl Tucker, who despite his upbringing in the Heritagist religion, which preaches the evils of artificial life, craves sex with moldies. Through genealogical coincidences linking characters of the preceding novels and their descendants, Tucker's origins and upbringing are inextricably caught up in the way the revolution occurred and the way it will advance. Working for the moldies on the Moon, he successfully helps shanghai Monique, along with her husband and the wife of the motel's owner; on the Moon, a strange alien invasion threatens Earth through the moldie population.

Like its predecessors, *Freeware* cooks up a rich stew of raunchy sex, dubious characters on society's fringe, and rich speculations on Artificial Intelligence and the stranger outreaches of mathematics (here, Penrose tiling and cellular automata). It is fast-paced, funny, and celebrates the complexity of the universe without dumbing it down. It adds up to unique voice in sf, exuberant, vigorous and dense with strange but vividly realized ideas.

In the Western World, science rather than religion drives social and cultural change; sf, which reflects the zeitgeist of contemporary society more closely than it might like to admit, generally gives organized religion a hard time. God is either absent (the idea of a prime mover gets short thrift in *The Genesis Trilogy*, for instance) or personified as a bunch of super-evolved aliens (or humans working backwards from the Eschaton); *Agape* is displaced by good old sense-of-wonder.

And so in Patricia Anthony's *God's Fires* (Ace, \$22.95) the machinations of the Catholic Church may be central to the plot, but the faith of its human components is viewed with a caustic eye. As in John Fowles's *A Maggot*, this highly readable historical novel, set in 17th-century Portugal, depicts a first contact which leads to accusations of madness and heresy by the uncomprehending authorities, who while they claim to be God's representatives prove to be all too humanly fallible in the face of genuine mystery.

Villagers of a remote village confess to Father Pessoa, a well-meaning but venal and cowardly Jesuit, strange traffic, including sexual congress, with creatures associated with glowing lights in the sky. A crashed spacecraft is discovered but mistaken for a Spanish plot, and

three of its crew are captured. King Afonso, a simpleton dominated by his brother, becomes infatuated with the creatures; ironically, only he manages to communicate with the spaceship, which reveals to him the heretical notion that the Earth travels around the Sun. Gomes, the glutinous Inquisitor General, sees a way of using this to topple the King, and sets to branding the mysterious creatures fallen angels which have disseminated heresies. Father Pessoa finds himself in the midst of a tragedy he is powerless to halt as Gomes roots out those of the village infected by the angels, including Pessoa's lover.

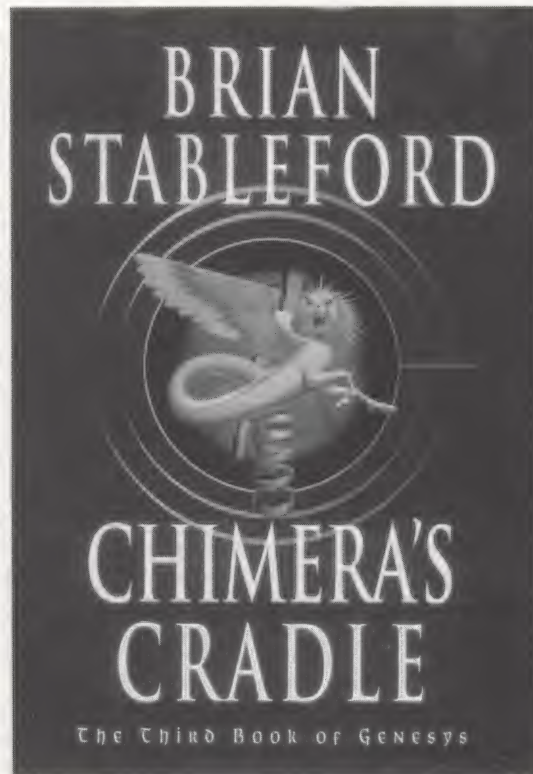
Anthony's depiction of the unfolding tragedy is confident and measured; her portrait of the particularities of courtly, ecclesiastical and peasant life spare yet vivid; her depiction of the corrupt mingling

despite being linked (sometimes vestigially) by dismembered fragments of an unpublished short story (nominally unpublished; a somewhat different version was published in *Asimov's SF Magazine*), they work best as discrete works rather than chapters in a single coherent narrative. But no matter how *Vacuum Diagrams* is labelled, Baxter does not deliver short measure; it is a fine and important collection.

The earlier stories show him assimilating and transforming the influence of other writers, in particular that of Larry Niven: "Gossamer" echoes Niven's "The Coldest Place," for in both a couple of astronauts stranded on Pluto discover life based on liquid helium; "Blue Shift," in which a human outsmarts aliens while surviving a dangerous astronomical phenomenon, borrows the template of Niven's "Neutron Star." But this collection also shows how quickly and confidently Baxter has gained his own voice within the framework of an epic narrative of a war between baryonic (normal matter) and non-baryonic (the elusive dark matter which may make up 90% of the bulk of the Universe) aliens which spans the beginning and end of the Universe.

In all this, humans are little more than a sideshow; indeed, they mistakenly take the wrong side, failing to realize the true nature of the struggle. This marginalization is echoed in the structure of the stories themselves, for their protagonists are often only sketchily characterized and take little part in the action, standing as witnesses to strange events in strange alien environments, whether discovering the nature of some of the strangest aliens in sf, or watching the slow dying fall of the baryonic-matter Universe.

In particular, the stories in the last section of the collection have a poignant and affecting view that is the opposite of the triumphalism characteristic of much American sf, for they depict primitive human societies scrabbling in the ruins of alien artefacts while the last stages of the titanic struggle play unnoticed around them. Here, the witness is a disembodied human intelligence with no prior history, a literal point of view who can do little but watch as the final scenes are played out (reminiscent of Olaf Stapledon's disembodied traveller in *Star Maker*). The stories are excerpts from a sweeping narrative which is not so much about human history and human character but the history of the Universe, its grandeur and its inevitable dissolution. They are the purest distillation of traditional hard sf. They add up to an essential collection.



of the Church and State at the expense of charity and truth acerbic, witty and unsparing. All the priests are victim to sins of lust or gluttony or pride; only Pessoa's lover, the village healer Berenice Pinheiro, retains a measure of unalloyed goodness. Written with cool restraint, *God's Fires*, Anthony's fifth novel, demonstrates an enviable talent for irradiating precisely controlled genre material with penetrating insight into character and historical circumstance.

*Vacuum Diagrams* (Voyager, £16.99) is not, as Stephen Baxter claims, a novel fixed up from 20-odd stories set in his Xeelee future history. For a start, two are actually extracts from *Ring* and *Raft*, and





Space Opera requires not only Sexuberance in scales of space and time and human history (see above), but also a kind of fearlessness on the part of the author, who must tightrope walk across the gulfs of plausibility guyed only by his own certainty that he can carry the tale home. In *Strider's Galaxy* (Legend, £5.99), subtitled *Book One of the Strider Chronicles*, Paul Barnett (better known as John Grant) makes a fair stab at scale, for there are light-year-devouring fleets of battleships galore, but there's something tentative about his delivery that fatally saps his ambition.

It begins promisingly. Strider, a young woman whose sharp intelligence cuts aslant the conventions of the corporation which recruits her, wins the coveted position of captain of humanity's first starship. We are allowed to see how she wins it, and given a demonstration of her winning qualities. All is set fair.

The starship is launched and falls – as you do – through an uncharted wormhole, arriving in a Galaxy far away and tens of thousands of years in the future; and almost immediately is co-opted into a rebellion against a tyranny which holds sway over tens of thousands of worlds, for it is taken over by discorporate aliens. These, the Images, of are great power and age, have unjustifiably silly names like Ten Per Cent Extra Free and, like too many disembodied aliens, speak in capital letters. The Images modify Strider's ship into a war vessel capable of gulping down light years in an eye blink, and we are soon engaged in the final war against the tyranny.

And here is the problem, for Strider becomes little more than a passenger, reacting to events rather than shaping them. Nor is she a convincing hero, for every action is accompanied by an internal debate which rehashes such sophomoric questions as whether might is always right, or if ends justify the means. And while Strider mourns collateral damage caused to alien worlds, her crew and passengers are whittled away with little comment. Worse, the slapdash plot, while gratifyingly fast-moving, is held together by no more than contrived coincidences. While the Images comment that something in their natures appears to attract serendipity, this is no more than a weak rationalization of lazy plotting. *Strider's Galaxy* isn't actively bad – there are some nice aliens, a few pretty good explosions, and a neat portrait of a loathsome emperor of the amniotronic Jabba the Hut variety – but it does nothing more than rearrange skiffy furniture, and Barnett fails to convince the reader that he really, truly, hand-on-heart, believes in it.

Paul J. McAuley

## Full of Quotations

Gwyneth Jones

Graham Greene on Mars? Well, not exactly. This is planet earth, about 150 years into our future. But Ian MacLeod's first novel, *The Great Wheel* (Harcourt, Brace, \$24), is unquestionably set in Greeneland: religious doubts, vibrant Third World squalor, guilty sex; a troubled idealist losing his faith, watched over by benignly amoral expatriate officials. In Europe the ravages of climate-change and viral plagues have been partly overcome. The much reduced population enjoys a stultifying utopian calm, while – for reasons best known to Mr McLeod! – a form of Catholicism has emerged as “the only surviving global religion.” South of an ugly morass once known as the Mediterranean, the Borderers inhabit the “Endless City,” packed together in pungent and colourful poverty. Father John, his faith shaken by the fate of his adored older brother Hal, who destroyed his own mind in a dangerous, perhaps suicidal penetration into the heart of “the Net,” is assigned to a Borderer parish. Depressed by the complacency of old sensualist Father Felipe, he clutches with relief at a rumour that the narcotic leaf *koiyl* which the Borderers love to chew, may be the source of an epidemic of fatal leukaemia known as *bludrut*. His investigation, shared with a charming and articulate young Borderer woman who becomes his mistress (an old-fashioned term, I know, but it suits the book), leads him deeper into the South, into scenes of desert mystification reminiscent of *The English Patient*. Inevitably, he discovers that there is no way to sort out the tangle of good and evil surrounding the contaminated leaf – so he takes up the deadly habit, in a last desperate attempt to bridge the gulf between himself and his parishioners.

*The Great Wheel*, true to the code of Greeneland, uses exotic and extrovert genre adventure as a vehicle, but is far more interested in the introverted workings of the spoiled priest's soul. The contaminated *koiyl* story slowly drifts, while a recapitulation of Father John's childhood, and his relationship with his adored brother, emerges as the central focus.

As the idol is revealed by degrees as vain, cold, fallible and finally despairing, MacLeod conveys the sheer horror of a certain kind of UK suburban society, as much of the present as of the future: boredom as the tenth circle of hell; the heat-death of a civilization. But I don't think I'm being too precious in saying that Hal the failed leader emerges as a figure of John's God as much as a victim of the White North's terminal malaise. The brain-dead grotesquely well-tended corpse that has lain for years in their parents' house is an image of the young priest's lost faith. It is the quiet, almost domestic decision forced on him by his mother's death – not his sexual awakening, nor his *koiyl* addiction, nor any bitter science-fictional revelations about the relationship between North and South – that provides the climax of the drama. At an early stage in the book Father John explains to someone that believing in God is “like falling in love.” *The Great Wheel* recounts an infatuation unmasked. Aficionados of Greeneland, however, will not be surprised to discover that the end of one spiritual affair is only the beginning of another.

Apparently Ian McLeod, in spite of the success of his admirable shorter works, had difficulty finding a UK publisher for *The Great Wheel*. I'm not altogether surprised. The “White North Guilt” scenario, in many variations and often including the repentant utopian going slumming in search of redemption, is not exactly box-fresh in UK sf; and MacLeod's narrative is deliberately, but occasionally painfully, low-key and slow. A meditative romance of self-discovery shouldn't have to strive for the same targets or move at the same pace as an action-adventure yarn; but it is sadly true that UK publishers need a lot of convincing before they'll take a risk with anything other than the “traditional sf” of Big Machines and Big Explosions. It will be a shame if *The Great Wheel* fails to find an audience in this country. Meanwhile, I feel sure it will consolidate MacLeod's success in the broader church (so to speak) of the US market; and I recommend it to



readers who can tolerate a little introspection, as a very personal novel, very much of the present, though dressed in the future tense.

I have no idea whether Ian MacLeod saw himself writing a futuristic Graham Greene novel. The comparison is mine, though I don't think anyone could call it far-fetched. Damien Broderick's *The White Abacus* (Avon, \$12.50) leaves us in no doubt about what's going on. This is the story of a student prince called Telmah, from an uncultured domain on the edge of civilization, taken in hand by a machine-intelligence entity or *ai* called Ratio, who has adopted the physical form of a *hu*, or humanoid (and who is also a spy for the Civilized World). When Telmah's royal father dies in suspicious circumstances, his uncle prepares with indecent haste to marry the prince's mother and claim the throne. Telmah, with *hu* Ratio at his side, rushes back to the rich little asteroid kingdom of Psyche. He sees his father's ghost, believes himself exhorted to seek vengeance, accidentally kills his girlfriend's father and calls in a troupe of wandering players to help him to establish his uncle's guilt.

Apart from the fact that the prince's name is just too thumpingly obvious, there's nothing much wrong with Damien Broderick's space-opera Shakespeare. There are some splendid Big Explosion, Big Machine set-pieces; and better still, as soon as the readers are thoroughly set up, everything changes. What looked like the famous, tragic murder investigation mutates into something completely different, a sort of *Hamlet* without the prints. But I became sorely irritated by Broderick's pompous authorial interventions which explain the Profound Meaning of all this, in concrete poetry and psychological and philosophical terms. I prefer to tease out the deeper meaning of a story for myself, if I feel it would reward the effort. I finally lost patience when I hit a non-fictional essay from that well-known retro-famous 20th-century sage "Daimon Keith" on the topic "My Ideal Girlfriend." Is Damien Broderick's middle initial K, by any chance? I wouldn't be at all surprised. Do I have to put up with this? Well, perhaps I do but you don't. Skip the non-fiction bits, unless you really like that sort of thing, and you may get on much better than I did.

Certainly, no one could accuse Eric S. Nylund of being over-ambitious. *Dry Water* (Avon, \$12.50), a fantasy thriller set in contemporary New Mexico, sets

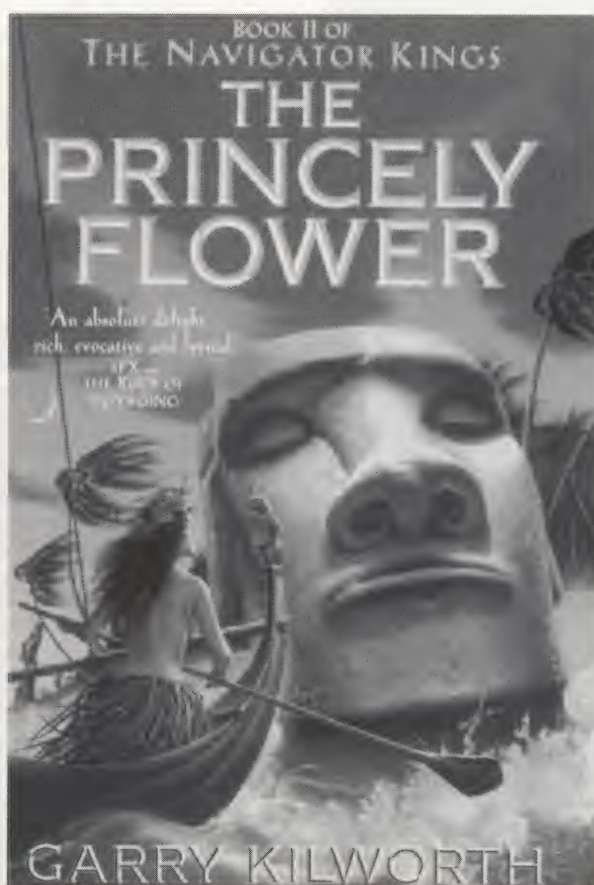
its sights low. Larry Ngitis, our hero, is a self-confessed sf hack with emergent psychic powers. On the run from a girlfriend demanding commitment he decides to set up house in Dry Water, a tiny desert settlement with Weird Associations that has become a writers' colony. I'm always amazed at the way the characters (usually writers; it saves a lot of effort) in this sort of story can zoom into town and get themselves set up in 48 hours in an artistic forest cabin with cathedral ceilings, wood-burning stove and Navajo rugs on every wall. I just know this would never happen for me, no matter how much money I could throw around. But magic, of course, explains everything. Larry has arrived on the Dry Water scene just as an ancient necromancer is duking it out with his one-time beloved, a sexy gorgeous immortal nature-goddess, for the possession of the secret underground spring that enables you to relive a past life and (supposing you have good contacts in 15th-century Portugal, for instance) change history. They both become aware, of course, of the new kid's Mighty Untapped Powers, and turn on poor old Larry – who fights back, in an extremely muddled way, with the aid of a gunslinger ghost and an aged homespun garage mechanic in the last stages of alcohol-related liver disease.

*Dry Water* ought to be pleasant, easy reading. Unfortunately, the young writer seems convinced that as long he turns in the requisite num-

ber of words, sex-scenes, babes with interesting-coloured hair and eyes, gruesome injuries and references to the occult sources, his job is done. There is no attempt to order the material, no coherence in the plot, and maybe worst of all not a hint of emotional involvement. Shattering forces rock the whole of human history to its foundations (never mind how, it has something to do with the Wandering Jew). His girlfriend commits suicide, his ex is possessed by a demon, people he loves die hideously in his very arms... Larry jumps into this maelstrom, pops out again the other side utterly unscathed, and settles down to rattle off another disorganized daydream for the stacks. It's not good enough. I appreciate that Eric S. Nylund may have a demanding day job. But it really cannot take much work to organize such simple mass-market components into a smoothly running machine.

Anyone who enjoyed *The Roof of Voyaging*, stirring first episode of Garry Kilworth's alternative-Polynesian tale, will not need my advice to seek out the second volume of "The Navigator Kings," *The Princely Flower* (Orbit, £16.99). It tells of a fresh voyage undertaken by Prince Ru of Raiatea, who is persuaded to carry with him our old friends from *The Roof of Voyaging* – most significantly Dorcha and Seamus, the Scottish woman and the Pictish man, former enemies and castaways who are by now a long-married and thoroughly naturalized Oceanian couple; the stylish and resourceful but exasperating Boy-Girl; and Kieto, who believes that it is his destiny to conquer Seamus and Dorcha's chilly, mysterious homeland. Prince Ru is in search of new territory under a new Faraway Heaven for himself and his followers. The Rarotongans are bent on reaching Rapanui, island of giants, because from Rapanui it may be possible to reach a different earth: a world where the "Land of the Long White Cloud" takes approximate geographical place of the "Land of Mists." According to the priests, the people of this country, the Maoris, are magnificent warriors who will teach Kieto the arts he needs, unknown in Oceania, for his plan of conquest.

*The Princely Flower* moves more swiftly than *The Roof of Voyaging*. World-building is taken as read, wonders follow thick and fast. Though there is plenty of non-magical Polynesian colour, notably supplied by the flamboyant, highly-sexual art of the Arioi troupe, it is a lot more apparent that this alternate Earth is a place where







magic works. Bizarre monsters lurk at every landfall. Rapanui, the island of giants, turns out to be the equivalent of Easter Island.

When the Raratongans arrive with prince Ru, searching for the mountain passage to another world, they discover a war in progress – with huge stone automata powered by magic in command of the territory they must cross. Meanwhile, Seamus is pursued by a vengeful stranger, Kumiki of Nuka Hiva, his son from an adventure in the previous volume; and the friends' old enemy Ragnu tracks them by sorcery from far away, plotting against their safe return.

*The Princely Flower* has the disadvantage of the second episode of a trilogy. Relationships may grow richer and deeper, thrills and spills may abound; however, we may suspect that no matter what trouble threatens nothing *really* unexpected is going to happen before Kieto achieves his goal. But this is another way of saying that readers can relax, in safe hands, and enjoy the ride.

Garry Kilworth does not regard "The Navigator Kings" as historical romance. Oceania is a dream place, based on the Polynesians' mythological version of their part of our world but existing in another space and time. Michaela Roessner's equally magical work *The Stars Dispose* (Tor, \$23.95) is more closely

constrained. The locale is Florence, Italy. The time is (for the bulk of the story) from March 1527 to around September 1530; the cast includes – and in dramatic roles, not as walk-by special guests, either – Michelangelo Buonarroti, Benevenuto Cellini, Catherine de' Medici, and so on. If I knew more about the period, I would know better exactly how the story is bent into shape by actual recorded events: as it is, I have a sense (not inappropriate!) of immutable cosmic forces brought to bear on the lives of the fictional characters: young Tommaso Arista, whose mother was the Duchessina Caterina's wet-nurse; Piera Arista herself, servant of the real-life Renaissance occultist Ruggiero the Old; whose dangerous, ancient and effectual womens' sorcery is powerless to save her younger children from male stupidity; and all the rest of the Befanini and Arista household, master cooks and carvers to the Medici.

As a work of fantasy fiction, *The Stars Dispose* is both limited and diffused by Roessner's decision to work in the chinks between some grim historical events, and her determination to celebrate the world of the women and the servants. Thus, though we are assured that Piera Arista's magic is far more profound and subtle than the self-important rituals of her master Ruggiero, she can't actually shift the course of history. And Caterina, who in 30 years will be, for better or

worse, the *de facto* ruler of the most powerful state in Europe (better not think too much about what she does with that power, or one might question the wisdom of those who protect her so passionately!), has no more room to manoeuvre than a pawn on a chess board. It's difficult to make drama under these restrictions. But as an appreciation of the art, the ambience and not least the wonderfully described food of the period, *The Stars Dispose* is a *tour de force*, and highly recommended.

However, with all respect for Piera Arista and her unsung real-life equivalents, when you have outrageously brilliant and brilliantly outrageous historical stars like these sharing the stage with the fictional shades, there is no contest over which cast gets the best lines. I can't resist recounting my favourite (if this is something Roessner made up then good for her; but it sounds original): Michelangelo Buonarroti does a commission for Pope Clement VII (the "Medici Chapel" which will be one of his most renowned works). People can't help noticing that the superb sculpted figure of Giuliano de' Medici, murdered brother of Lorenzo the Magnificent, bears no resemblance to the young man as he was in life. *So what?* sez Michelangelo. *A thousand years from now, who is going to care what that guy really looked like?* That's my boy!

Gwyneth Jones

## A Novel of Character

Chris Gilmore

If your political leanings are anything except hard Authoritarian Right, New Age travellers must pose something of a problem. For the Libertarian Right their combination of self-righteous squalor and in-ye-face contempt for property is anathema, yet to embrace liberty is to espouse tolerance of lifestyle; it's a poor sort of tolerance that's coterminous with approval. From the Left it's easy to castigate inept right-wing demands that they get jobs – what sane person would employ them? They get up the noses of your opponents, but they don't exactly exemplify traditional working-class virtues, let alone the values of the lower-middle class whose votes swing all general elections.

This problem lies at the heart of

Phil Rickman's *The Chalice* (Macmillan, £16.99), which is a rare hybrid: a fantasy and a non-partisan political novel. It's also a novel of character in the English tradition, and I'm not at all surprised to see it endorsed by *inter alia* Ruth Rendell and Joanna Trollope.

The action is set in Glastonbury, for which Rickman has a fine sense of place, and begins when a convoy of such "pilgrims" arrives at the Tor, allowing Rickman to sketch the residents' characters by deftly displaying their reactions. Those range from a sincere regret that they can't be shot as vermin, through a desire to make money out of them (not always legally), to a genuine admiration – this last on the part of Woolly Woolas-

ton, the only New Age councillor (affiliation unspecified), and the only character who doesn't quite ring true. I'm prepared to believe plenty of the Glastonbury Labour and Lib. Dem. Parties, but not that they'd select a self-confessed expert on ley lines for a winnable ward.

But he's peripheral. The principals are Juanita Carey, owner of a New Age bookshop in which she no longer believes; her unrequited lover Jim Battle, retired building society branch-manager, now landscape-painter with a slight drink problem; Joe Powys, writer of a popular book on the occult; and Diane Ffitch, rebellious scion of a hard-edged Tory dynasty whose refuge from a congenitally overweight body and a loveless childhood is to fantasize



about having been Dion Fortune last time round: a somewhat eccentric crew, but no worse than you'll find in the pages of Iris Murdoch or Muriel Spark, and as well drawn.

The heavy stuff comes, initially, from the convoy, some of whom are not the usual custard-heads, and are capable of drawing down *something* from the Tor. Meanwhile Verity Endicott, an elderly spinster who has always regarded herself as psychically null, has had a disturbing but unverifiable experience. What is the link? What is the role of the sinister American "Tenebral Therapist" who takes over her life? Will the forces of Good achieve at least a stand-off with those of Evil? Will Glastonbury ever be the same again, and should it be?

This book is excellently put together, with interlocking sub-plots that arise naturally from the pre-existing relationships among the people of what remains in essence a claustrophobically small town. The body-count is low, but there is an effective sense of mounting evil, less from the supernatural element (overt but unpredictable) than from the passions unleashed by the conflict between the travellers and their hunt-saboteur/road-protester allies *versus* the locals, who want a link road to bring them commerce and respectable tourists with money. Rickman is scrupulously fair in presenting the arguments of both, but as the lines are drawn the leaders on both sides become more extreme and less scrupulous, while among both sides' rank and file are those who see in the "cause" licence to gratify their basest urges.

The book reaches a slightly ambiguous but satisfying climax, though (in the second half especially) some of the linking passages are skimmed. It's always possible to work out what has happened, but I had to double back at times. My only structural reservation is that the travellers themselves, having set everything going, fade out early and never re-establish themselves as a presence. But it's an excellent book in all aspects, and at almost all points; as it's his fifth I was surprised not to have heard of Phil Rickman before. Either he's been unjustly ignored, or he's come on a lot since last time – perhaps quite a lot of both.

**“W**hat goes round, comes round.” I suppose the first-ever novel about a virtual reality machine was Shepherd Mead's *The Big Ball of Wax* (1954), though the idea goes back to *Brave New World* and can be traced to Chaucer (*The Franklin's Tale*) and doubtless beyond. The technical details have gained in

realism, but George Foy's *The Shift* is strongly reminiscent of Mead in his assumptions about how capitalism will approach the machine's potential, and in his depiction of office politics at X-Corp, the company that controls it. It's also reminiscent of Pohl & Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants* and Alfred Bester's *The Rat Race*, though not, I think, by direct derivation; topics attract approaches. The genre classics got there first, but if you enjoyed that saturnine trio you should enjoy *The Shift*, for Foy's emotional range is heavily skewed to the dark end, and made more poignant by his decision (in *homage* to Damon Runyon?) to write in the historic present throughout.

Alex Munn, the first-person viewpoint, is working on *Real Life*, which is to be the first fully interactive virtual soap, and not enjoying it; the plot is *Dynasty* crossed with *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* What he cares about is his private project in the same mode, which is a tough-cop drama set in 1850s New York, a hyper-sordid milieu which Munn/Foy has obviously researched with gusto. There every barkeep has Mickey Finns on tap, the better to kidnap and shanghai sailors; every prostitute bilks her clients as a matter of course; and every Bowery Bhoy has been apprenticed to a master in his chosen field of crime by the time he's eleven.

A great place to visit, but for Munn

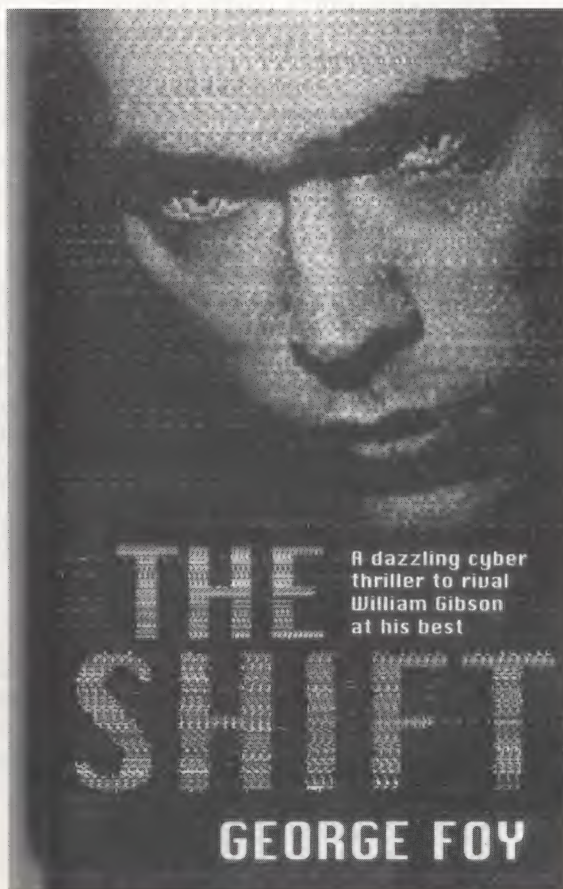
near-future New York is getting a bit too much like his own creation; someone seems to have hired a pack of Vietnamese gangsters to kill him, and he has no idea who or why; moreover, he seems to have been targeted by a serial killer from his own, invented world. So is this just a techno-thriller, or science fantasy as well? That I won't divulge, as I enjoyed trying to work it out, even while I was enjoying the story, which is pacy, well visualized and not impenetrably complex. Those who happen to know the older parts of Manhattan will probably get even more out of the book than I did, because Foy has mapped it quite as closely as Jeff Noon maps his books onto Manchester; and has slipped in some social and economic predictions for the city's next ten years. The only real fault is a point of construction where Munn, by now framed for murder, manages to avoid capture through the inexplicable absence of an obvious stake-out. But everything else is first rate – the best techno-thriller I can remember reading.

**S**ince my teens two of my favourite poems have been Tennyson's "Tithonus" and "Ulysses," which are the dramatic monologues of two old men who achieved mighty things when young, but must now confront both the consequences of their actions and the diminution of their powers. I was therefore well tuned to

the virtues of David Gemmell's *Winter Warriors* (Bantam, £15.99), which features three time-expired soldiers. Once they were the best in their fields; now, "Tho' much is taken, much abides" – but they are still to be paid off into the unfamiliar and uncongenial worlds of peace and old age.

It's described as a Drenai novel, but the period is long after Druss, and the geopolitics are those of the age of Alexander the Great, with Drenan and Ventria equivalent to Macedon and Persia. As the book opens Axiana, unloved consort of the Drenai King Skanda, is heavily pregnant – just as was Princess Statira when Alexander died. But this is not a return to the world of *Lion of Macedon*, nor is Gemmell taking a leaf from the three volumes of Alison Spedding's *A Walk in the Dark*; Gemmell has used history as an inspiration only (just as he used the Mongol incursions into Europe in *Legend*), so you'll get just as much from the book if you don't know the original.

It's a well-knit tale of a rascally plot to liberate demons back into the world of flesh and blood. The necessary magic requires the murder not only of Skanda but of his unborn son, and the circum-







stances are such that only the three old soldiers can protect Axiana. Standard stuff, but Gemmell has always done it well, and his more recent books have shown a gradual but steady deepening of his characters. Nogusta the swordsman, Khebra the archer and Bison the strong man are carefully delineated, with all their moral shortcomings and occasional failures to understand each other (especially in Bison's case), no less than their rough-hewn decency and comradeship.

I found these aspects of considerably more interest than the story itself, which contains the usual complement of battles on the astral and earthly planes, the usual multiple viewpoints (including those of the heavies) and Gemmell's usual melancholy observation that however nobly you live, and however gallantly you die, the world turns and future generations will forget you in the helter-skelter of their own concerns. Much as I said of *Dark Moon* (in *Interzone* 115), it's the mixture more or less as before, but mixed very well.

A principle which I have long advanced is that the more fantastic are your postulates, the more rigorous must be your internal logic; to disregard it, I maintain, leads to a downward spiral of Dada, magic realism, metamorphic fiction, Chapter 14,000,004 of *The Chaos Engineers* and other variations on the theme of tennis without a net. Yet some generic children's classics successfully flout my principle, particularly with regard to "intelligent" animals; I refer especially to *The Wind in the Willows*, all the works of Beatrix Potter and *The Midnight Folk*. How then to approach Pat Gray's violet-hued novella *The Cat* (Dedalus, £6.99), which adds a dash of Tom & Jerry to Kenneth Grahame's approach, but is not addressed to children?

Rather curiously it invokes *Animal Farm* (in the text and in the blurb), though it could hardly be less like that heavily anchored book. The story is simple. The owner of a suburban villa having died, his widow moves out preparatory to selling up, abandoning the (unnamed) family Cat, who must thereafter "fend for himself," which he does in lavish if precarious style. Having taught himself to talk (via Radio 4) he refurnishes his home by telephone (using the late owner's credit card and a catalogue) and settles down to a life of easy debauchery, subsisting on deliveries of groceries and Chinese meals obtained in the same fashion. Even his planned seduction of a human female neighbour is thwarted less by the species-barrier than by his neuter condition. Meanwhile, a Greek chorus of local wild animals, principally a Rat and a Mouse, observe his activities in awe and dis-

may.

Good fun, but the other animals are already humanized past reason. Their homes boast grates with fires in them, for instance, and all wear clothes (the Rat is a snappy dresser with an extensive wardrobe); the Cat may be learning French by radio, but the Mouse, after a near escape from a baited trap, consoles himself with the dog Latin epigram *Mors in Fromagium*. (All right, it should be *Mors per caseum*, but pretty good for a mouse.) There's no explanation of where any of this comes from, which begs the question of why the Cat needs to perpetrate his frauds, which means, ultimately, that the story loses purpose.

Lacking purpose, it peters out in a disappointing fashion, leaving the reader with the dull chore of interpreting it. Is it all the dying dream of the owner who succumbs to a coronary in the first chapter? Or the dying dream of an abandoned cat, run over outside what was once his home? Or a fusion of the two? I favour the third option, for what little that may be worth. Somewhere underneath there's a parable about the evils of materialism, but that's old news. More discipline required.

Being a notorious cynic, when I encounter any vanity-press, small-press or (in the present case) self-published work, I presume that it has gone the usual rounds without success. No doubt my presumption is sometimes wrong; the writer, seeing that his offering is quirky in approach or hard to classify, has taken that road by choice, not as a *pis aller*. Nor do I, having slated many big-name offerings, allow such considerations much weight.

Nonetheless, when the book in question is overtly commercial in character I wonder anew, and never more so than in the case of *The Dragon's Homecoming* by Mervyn Charles (Black Dragon Press, £5.99), Book One of a projected four-volume novel. It begins with an account of how its world was created, reminiscent of passages from the early part of *The Silmarillion*, then introduces us to the current state of play. On the island continent of the Six Realms war seems imminent, being fomented by a vile shape-shifter who has usurped the identity of a senior military diplomat. His intention is that the war should be as bloody as possible, so that the exhausted contenders will fall easy prey to his own principal, the Imperanon, who stands aloof for now. Meanwhile, the survivors of a group of knightly diplomats who have been treacherously attacked are trying to fight their way home through the Dragonback Mountains which form the central spine of the continent. They are greatly helped by Aylin, a flame-haired beauty who has attached herself to their party, and

who happens to be a member of the Grey Wolves, an order of dedicated assassins. This does not prevent one of the knights from falling in love with her, which must (if both survive) lead him into conflict with his sworn duty, Grey Wolves being under the ban in his homeland.

Meanwhile cut to Alexandra Autumnsong, another beauty but not as youthful as she looks, for she is a survivor (maybe the last sane survivor) of the Earth Children, quasi-immortal beings roughly equivalent to Tolkien's elves. She is hanging out in the holiest part of the mountains, waiting to be reunited with her equally supernatural horse. How will she become embroiled, will she find love, or is her role essentially tragic?

Standard stuff, but a good strong situation, whose dynamics engender the sort of fast-moving, multiple-viewpoint story for which the public has an insatiable appetite (and I like them too, if they're done well); so why aren't Gollancz, HarperCollins, Hodder-Headline, Macmillan, Orion etc. fighting over it? The answer, sadly, is that Charles has no ear for the language, shaky grammar, and a compulsion to explain every last detail. I take a paragraph almost at random, from when Aylin has just been captured.

They urged their mounts forward, knowing that time was all important. The initial confusion caused by their appearance killed six more soldiers. They died as the large horses trampled all before them beneath their steel-shod hooves. Weapons wielded by the riders added fatally to the carnage.

Any proficient sub-editor would reduce that to

They urged their great horses forward, trampling six soldiers in the initial confusion, then inflicted further carnage with hand-weapons.

But publishers no longer employ sub-editors, proficient or otherwise, to hack away excess verbiage; the writer is expected to do it himself or hire his own. Anyone editing this book must shoulder a massive burden of very easy work, some as basic as correcting Charles's habit of using apostrophes to form plurals but omitting them from genitives. Once those chores have been cleared the four (much reduced) volumes will have some chance of constituting a book someone like me might pay good money to read. There are other sorts of people, as Charles reminds us himself: in his introduction he confides that his favourite author is Stephen Donaldson; mine are Mary Renault and Jack Vance, and there you have it.

Chris Gilmore



# From Manchester to London

Ken Brown

In *Annotated Alice* by Jeff Noon (Doubleday, £14.99), young Alice goes through the workings of a clock and finds herself under a future Manchester, a slightly more extreme version of the Manchester of Noon's *Vurt* and *Pollen* (but if you didn't know this was a sequel you might not notice: all three are very different books). The strengths of *Automated Alice* aren't in its plot – if you read Jeff Noon's interview in a recent *Interzone* you'll already know almost as much about the plot of this book as you are likely to find out by reading the novel – but in the twists and turns of language and identity.

The Alice in the book isn't the historical Alice Liddell but a different but equally "real" Alice, the Alice of the Lewis Carroll stories, who in *this* story has (perhaps) been reborn as a personality in the shared virtual reality that is taking over Manchester. She meets Celia, the Automated Alice, a mechanical twin sister who may, or may not, have some existence in the "present." It isn't clear whether the action of the novel ever gets out of the Vurt into the "real" streets. It is possible, inside the story, that either Alice or Celia suspect this. In the end the story-Alice gets back to the past (which is perhaps just another location in the Vurt) leaving her automated anagram Celia in the future.

The author walks onstage at various points, which helps because I tend to hear the book in the author's voice. A fiction such as this can be constructed by the reader as a dialogue between the reader and a virtual author who is, of course, a fictional model of the author in the mind of the reader – just as the Alices in the book are not obviously either real or virtual within the context of the story but outside the story are obvi-

ously neither the historical Alice nor (as constructed by the reader) are they quite the same as the Alice or Alices in the author's mind, never mind being the same as they imagine themselves to be...

Confused? You will be. It might help to read *Pollen* first. Have fun.

Meanwhile, quietly overhead, Ursula K. Le Guin has been assembling quite another kind of future history. *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea* (Gollancz, £15.99) is a collection containing a number of recent short pieces that are all very well and good, including the mildly

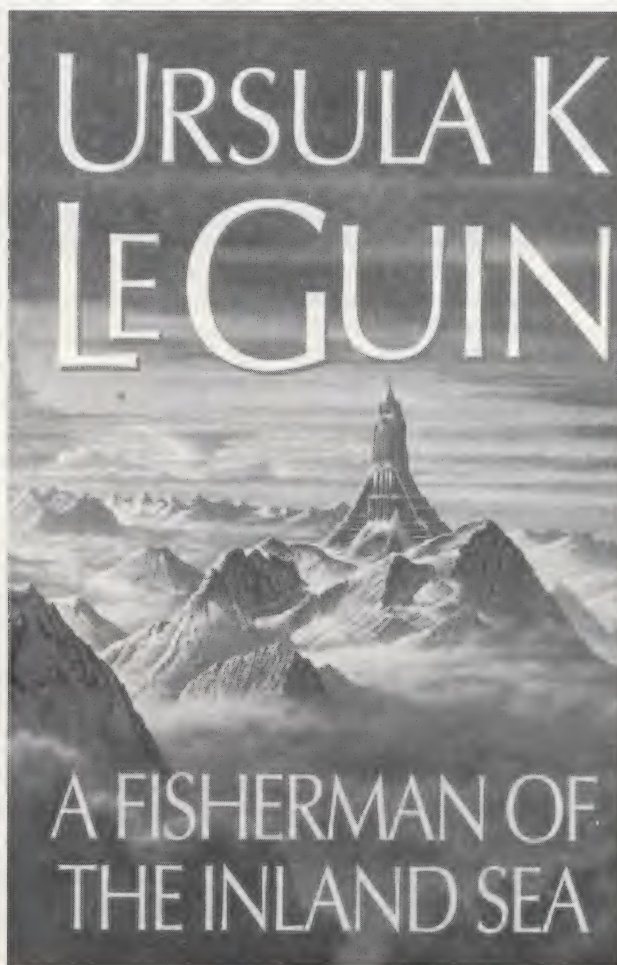
notorious "Newton's Sleep" which is perhaps a polemic against space colonists and High Frontier types – or maybe just against the well-off who increasingly choose to live in isolated and defended compounds, separate from the life around them. But the heart of the book are three additions to the tales of the Hainish Ekumene, the interstellar community that was the background to her great novels of the 1960s and 1970s.

After getting us used to a universe held together by the Ansible and the nearly-as-fast-as-light drive, in which travel is slow and wearying, but information can be disseminated

instantly (which, after all, is the world our grandparents were born into, linked by the steamship and the telegraph) Le Guin has sold the pass. The Cetian temporal physicists on Annares have invented faster-than-light travel, in this case the Churten effect (no, I don't know what that is an anagram of).

If this was written by most sf authors they would explain the new drive twice (Le Guin does have some wonderful technobabble: "the field is to be conceived as the virtual field, in which the unreal interval becomes virtually effective through the mediary coherence – don't you see?"), then disappear off to some remote solar system to conquer it, or to make first contact, or to be absorbed by Higher Intelligences, or to reintroduce war, or whatever currently fashionable FTL-users do.

As it was written by Le Guin, it is not as simple as that. The stories aren't about the machine but about the people who use it, or imagine it, or are imagined by it. When more than one person *churten*s, the hard thing is to agree who they are and why they are doing it







and getting their thoughts back in order. If you go somewhere and come back instantaneously, how do you know (or prove) that you've been? What happens if when you get there you can't agree where you are? You tell stories to each other, until you agree.

So these are stories about stories – although stories that include dances and songs and official debriefings. The title of the whole collection, *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*, refers to a Japanese folk-story within a story, within “Another Story,” the last and longest and best of them.

“Another Story” is so well done, and so well written that you almost don't notice that it is a tightly-plotted piece of hard sf, complete with time paradox, as well as a tragedy, a love story and a loving description of a peculiar human society (“where she comes from women don't even get married properly”). It is a stunning tribute to Chekhov's principle (if it was Chekhov) that you never show a gun on the mantelpiece in the first act unless it is going to be fired in the third. And it is maybe the only story I have ever read that uses the word “moiety” correctly more than once.

Read it if you can get hold of it. I cried.

There is more than one history of future history. The most common one starts with Doc Smith and goes through Heinlein to Niven and Pournelle. But there is another that includes, among others, Cordwainer Smith and Iain Banks, and Ursula K. Le Guin is one of its heroes. I'm glad she is still adding to it.

**Open Sesame** (Orbit, £15.99) represents business as usual from Tom Holt. This time the legend being worked over is, not surprisingly, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, and the earthling who gets caught up is a young woman of no obvious importance who lives in Southampton.

I don't know why, but I liked this one a lot more than his last few. The ingredients are as before, the characters more or less the same, the plot as full as holes (to be fair, this is the kind of book in which hackneyed plot elements are likely to walk on stage grumbling about compulsory overtime at normal rates) but the one-liners are, for some reason, funnier. From the woman who would acquit Macbeth of murdering sleep on the grounds of justifiable homicide, to the Fairy Godfather who gives you Three Wishes You Can't Refuse, the Djinn who speaks with the voice of the late Kenneth Williams, to the magic mirror with the software bug, this is full of things that made me laugh.

Perhaps the author was happier when he wrote it, or less happy, or hungrier, or has more spare time, or is busier, or something. Or perhaps I was just in a better mood than usual

when I read it. Or maybe, as someone said before, Tom Holt writes better the nearer he keeps to his Wagnerian mother-lode. Ali Baba might not look very Wagnerian on the surface, but the way this story pans out with the good guy exiled to Middle Earth trying to protect what he holds with the aid of a partly mortal daughter who just happens to have the Ring that lets you talk to animals (or, in this case, domestic appliances)... well, connections are there if you look for them. You just have to use your imagination; after all, this is a fairy story.

So, I suppose, is David Drake's *The Lord of the Isles* (Tor, \$25.95); but I can't be sure because I found it unreadably boring. Despite trying to start at least three times it never grabbed my attention enough for me to get very far. That's probably my fault. Here is a quote from page 444 to give you a flavour of what I missed:

“Come,” the Hooded One repeated. He gestured with the long rod in his hands; violet light gleamed from the tip. “Come to Malkar, humans.” Tenoctris laughed. “I watched your false throne shatter on Yole, wizard...”

Perhaps if I was an American I would be diagnosed as having Attention Deficit Disorder. Perhaps I could read this book if I took Ritalin.

**The God Game** by Gerald Suster (NEL, £5.99) is marketed as horror, although I can't say I found it particularly horrific. In the late 1890s Arthur Machen, recently widowed, finds scenes from his own stories coming to life around him, and comes across other men who not only call themselves Arthur Machen, but write short stories in his own style. A century later Adam Stride, novelist and private detective, comes across other stories supposedly written by a character in one of his novels.

This allows the author to intersperse the chapters that take the action forward with 14 very short stories, written in various styles, at the points at which they are read by the characters in the novel. Of course these stories also aid the plot, containing (perhaps) coded messages or clues as to the nature of the mystery.

The book is set entirely in London, and almost entirely in pubs. It is a London that I know – although mostly north of the river. David Suster's characters drink in pubs that I drink in (or which are so like them that I can't tell them from pubs I drink in), they walk down roads that I walk down, they even shop in shops that I shop in (and a lot of other *Interzone* readers, I guess: one of the scenes is set in the Fantasy Centre on Holloway Road). The farthest south the action gets is Lewisham (where I am writing this),

the farthest west seems to be in “a Victorian terrace built for the middle classes just a five-minute walk from Turnham Green Underground Station” – which could easily be Bedford Park, which is “Primrose Park” where the first scene of G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who was Thursday* is set.

Which is, I suspect, deliberate. This book is not just set in London, it is about London, part of the Matter of London. For this reader it was infested with the memories of other books of London – I mean “of,” not “about” because there is a literary London made of books just as real as the geographical London made of bricks. *The Man Who was Thursday* is here, and *The North London Book of the Dead* and just about everything I've ever heard of by Iain Sinclair or Peter Ackroyd; and Moorcock is in here somewhere, and deep in the foundations there are hints of Dickens and Defoe.

After saying all that, I have to admit that the most obvious references aren't to London books at all. Machen himself wasn't particularly a London writer, Aleister Crowley and his circle and a whole load of decadents are in here, and Adam Stride, Private Detective, who is hired by a beautiful, mysterious and dangerous woman to find the Holy Grail (I am not making this up), has to owe a lot to Sam Spade – and, I'm sure, to a great many other detective stories that I'm not familiar with.

But the most obvious similarity is to John Fowles's *The Magus*. Maybe that is why I wasn't very horrified by this so-called work of horror. I was just glad that I wasn't re-reading *The Magus* – which has more or less the same plot, but sticks far more knives into the reader, and twists them further, even if it lets the protagonist off more lightly in the end.

If that seems like a hell of a lot of material for a book of less than 400 pages, it is. It skips over things that could have been further developed, all the characters (except perhaps Machen) are at best two-dimensional, and a lot of it reads like parody. To be fair, some of it might be meant to be parody, particularly Adam Stride's relationships with women. That is another thing that tends to defuse the horror; it is hard to feel for the pains of hollow characters at whom the author seems to be laughing behind their backs. I don't think this is a very good book and it certainly isn't a very *nice* book. But, all that apart, I read it in one go and I had lot more fun and interest from it than I've had from most novels I've read recently. And Iz` actually did want to find out what happened at the end – even though my guesses all turned out to be correct.

Ken Brown



The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Alexander, Ric. **Cyber-Killers**. Introduction by Peter F. Hamilton. Orion, ISBN 1-75280-783-8, viii+408pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; it contains reprint stories on a cybernetic theme by J. G. Ballard, Greg Bear, Pat Cadigan, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, William Gibson, Joe Haldeman, Harry Harrison, Frank Herbert, Peter James, Larry Niven, Terry Pratchett, Robert Sheckley, Robert Silverberg, Ian Watson, Roger Zelazny and others; many of the stories are old standards [e.g. Poul Anderson's "Sam Hall" and Alfred Bester's "Fondly Fahrenheit"], and a couple are from *Interzone* [Iain Banks's "A Gift from the Culture" and Kim Newman's "Dreamers"]; "Ric Alexander" is a pseudonym of veteran anthologist Peter Haining; perhaps the fact that there's only one female contributor in this big book is indicative of his old-fashionedness.) 16th June 1997.

Anderson, Kevin J. **Climbing Olympus**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648305-4, 297pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; yet another Mars novel; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 98.) 12th June 1997.

Applegate, K. A. **The Visitor**. "Animorphs, 2." Scholastic/Hippo, ISBN 0-590-19353-8, 175pp, B-format paperback, £3.50. (Juvenile sf/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) May 1997.

Asimov, Isaac. **Magic: The Final Fantasy Collection**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648203-1, 305pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Fantasy and non-fiction collection, first published in the USA, 1996; about half the book consists of previously uncollected fiction from the late 1980s and early 1990s; the other half consists of brief essays, mostly Asimov's *SF Magazine* editorials from the 1980s, on the subject of fantasy writing and fantasy themes; reviewed by Nigel Brown in *Interzone* 109.) 19th May 1997.

Bachman, Richard. **The Regulators**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-67177-7, x+446pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1996; "Richard Bachman," as all the world knows by now, is a pseudonym of Stephen King; reviewed by Peter Crowther in *Interzone* 113.) 19th June 1997.

Banks, Iain. **A Song of Stone**. Abacus, ISBN 0-316-64016-6, 280pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf [?] novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is not one of Iain M. Banks's space operas; rather, it's one of Iain Banks's mainstream fabulations – but it looks as though it may be marginal sf for all that.) 7th August 1997.

Barker, Clive. **Forms of Heaven: Three Plays**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-225592-8, xvi+378pp, hardcover, cover by the author, £16.99. (Horror/fantasy play collection, first published in the USA, 1996; it includes the plays *Crazy Face*, *Paradise Street* and *Subtle Bodies*; there is an eight-page introduction which begins with the author describing his paintings – OK, OK, we get the message: here is a novelist, short-story writer, playwright, screenwriter, director, producer and painter [and he was probably also an actor in there somewhere] – it reminds us of that Ian Dury line, "there ain't half been some clever bastards.") 12th June 1997.

Baxter, Stephen. **Titan**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225424-7, 581pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; another big new novel from Baxter; this one about the discovery of life on Saturn's largest moon in the early 21st century.) 18th August 1997.

Bear, Greg. **Slant**. Legend, ISBN 0-09-935081-5, 491pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; a sequel to *Queen of Angels* [1990]; we listed the American [Tor Books] edition here last month, and it was slated for "July," so this UK edition may well be the world first by a short margin.) 5th June 1997.

Bowker, David. **The Butcher of Glastonbury**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06254-1, 224pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Crime/horror novel, first edition; a follow-up to the author's previous title *The Death Prayer*.) 26th June 1997.

Bradbury, Ray. **The Illustrated Man**. Avon, ISBN 0-380-97384-7, ix+275pp, hardcover, cover by Tim O'Brien, \$15. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1951; this small-format reissue, the second in an Avon Books programme which began with *The Martian Chronicles* [which we were not sent], has a new introduction by the author.) June 1997.

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. **Gravelight**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85606-7, 351pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, \$24.95. (Horror/crime novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is actually the third in a new series by Bradley, described by the publishers as "fantasy-suspense"; we didn't see either of the previous volumes, *Witchlight* and *Ghostlight* [both Tor, 1996].) September 1997.

Brown, Courtney. **Cosmic Voyage: A Scientific Discovery of Extraterrestrials Visiting Earth**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-69579-X, viii+275pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Pseudo-science text, first published in the USA, 1996; the author has a Ph.D. and his book applies something called "scientific remote viewing" to ufology, with allegedly spectacular results; Whitley Strieber commends it on the back cover – 'nuff said.) 5th June 1997.

Cook, Glen. **She is the Darkness: Book Two of Glittering Stone**. "The Seventh Chronicle of the Black Company." Tor, ISBN 0-312-85907-4, 384pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is a fol-

low-up to *Bleak Seasons* [1996].) October 1997.

Dash, Mike. **Borderlands**. "The ultimate exploration of the unknown." Heinemann, ISBN 0-434-00335-2, x+501pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Compendium of pseudo-scientific tidbits; first edition; the author is a regular contributor to *Fortean Times*, and this book is very much a latter-day example of the Charles Fort genre: "Alien abductions... Mexican wolf children... Sea serpents... Showers of frogs...") 16th June 1997.

Di Filippo, Paul. **Ciphers: A Novel**. "A Post-Shannon Rock'n'Roll Mystery." Cambrian Publications [PO Box 112170, Campbell, CA 95011-2170, USA] and Permeable Press [47 Noe St., #4, San Francisco, CA 94114-1017, USA], ISBN 1-878914-02-2, 541pp, trade paperback, no price shown. (Sf-fantasy-"slipstream" novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous signed, limited hardcover edition [not seen]; the author's debut novel, following many short stories and several collections, it's described in the accompanying publicity letter as "so big it's taking two small publishers to bring it out!") 1st July 1997.

Dozois, Gardner, and Sheila Williams, eds. **Isaac Asimov's Moons**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00453-9, 239pp, A-format paperback, cover by Den Beauvais, \$5.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; it consists of seven stories set on the moon, all reprinted from Asimov's *SF Magazine* – by Terry Bisson, Geoffrey A. Landis, Robert Reed, Kim Stanley Robinson, Allen Steele and others.) 1st June 1997.

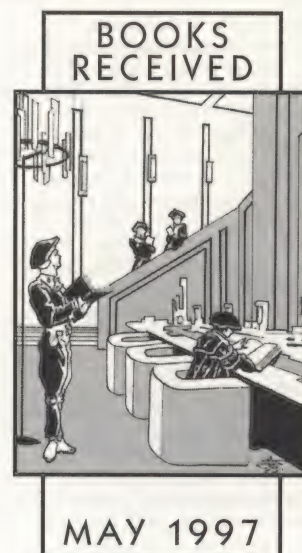
Fitch, Marina. **The Seventh Heart**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00451-2, 310pp, A-format paperback, cover by Rudy Muller, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book by a new American writer who has published some short stories and is commended by Kristine Kathryn Rusch.) 1st June 1997.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **The Killing Dance**. "Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter." Ace, ISBN 0-441-00452-0, 387pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee MacLeod, \$6.50. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; this appears to be the sixth title in the author's dark fantasy/crime crossover series.) 1st June 1997.

Harman, Andrew. **A Midsummer Night's Gene**. Legend, ISBN 0-09-978871-3, 359pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Posen, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous A-format paperback edition, priced at £4.99.) 5th June 1997.

Herbert, James. **'48**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-647600-7, 330pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Alternative-history horror novel, first published in 1996; it's set in a 1948 that never was, after Hitler has devastated Britain with something called the Blood Death.) 16th June 1997.

Hoh, Diane. **Prom Date**. Point Horror, ISBN 0-590-19068-7, 274pp, A-format paperback, £3.50. (Young-adult horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) May 1997.



Holland, Tom. **Deliver Us from Evil**. Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-88248-8, 394pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Historical horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; a third novel by the praised author of *The Vampire and Supping with Panthers*.) 11th September 1997.

Holt, Tom. **Bitter Lemmings: Several Good Songs Spoilt by Tom Holt**. Becon Publications [75 Rosslyn Ave., Harold Wood, Essex RM3 0RG], ISBN 1-870824-38-5, 39pp, ringbound, cover by Tom Abba, £4. (Humorous verse collection, first edition; worth reading for "The Wild Canadian Boy" – described by the author as "an 'umble tribute to John Clute"; a statement inside reads: "All profits from the sale of this book will go to the FILK FUND to help defray the costs of bringing foreign guests to British Filk conventions, and [even more important] sending them back afterwards"; it's available from the above address for the stated price plus 75p postage.) Late entry: 28th April publication, received in May 1997.

Holt, Tom. **Paint Your Dragon**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-456-1, 311pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Lee, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1996; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 117.) 5th June 1997.

Keyes, J. Gregory. **The Blackgod: Chosen of the Changeling, Book Two**. Illustrations by David A. Cherry. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40394-0, 559pp, hardcover, cover by Tom Kidd, \$24. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) Late entry: 1st April publication, received in May 1997.

Kilworth, Garry. **Thunder Oak: Book One of The Welkin Weasels**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-54546-5, 382pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £4.99. (Juvenile animal fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) July 1997.

Light, John. **The Lords of Hare**. Photon Press [29 Longfield Rd., Tring, Herts. HP23 4DG], ISBN 1-897968-03-5, 226pp, small-press paperback, £5. (Sf novel, first edition; a self-published sequel to the author's now distant first novel, *The Well of Time* [Hale, 1981].) May 1997.





Lovisi, Gary. **Collecting Science Fiction and Fantasy**. "Instant Expert." Alliance Publishing [PO Box 080377, Brooklyn, NY 11208-0002, USA], vii+136pp, tall narrow paperback, \$14. (Guide to collecting old sf, fantasy and horror paperbacks; first edition; this is one of a series of small trade paperbacks devoted to the collecting of various things; it's nicely laid out, and illustrated [in black and white only] with old pb covers; recommended to those who have the bug...) *No date shown: received in May 1997.*

Lustbader, Eric. **Dragons on the Sea of Night: The Fifth Novel in the Sunset Warrior Cycle**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-225005-5, 291pp, hardcover, cover by Don Maiz, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; the previous four novels in this sequence were written in the late 1970s, back in the days when the author was a relative unknown who called himself Eric Van Lustbader [which is why he appears under "V" in sundry reference books]; he is now a bestselling martial-arts thriller writer, but evidently has decided to revisit his fantasy-genre roots with this book.) *30th June 1997.*

MacLeod, Ian R. **Voyages by Starlight**. Foreword by Michael Swanwick. Arkham House, ISBN 0-87054-171-4, 269pp, hardcover, cover by Nicholas Jainschigg, no price shown. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; hard on the heels of his debut novel [see review by Gwyneth Jones in the present issue], this is MacLeod's first volume of short stories, most of them reprinted from Asimov's, with a couple from *F & SF* and *Amazing*; recommended.) *No date shown: it states "1996" inside, but probably was delayed; received in May 1997.*

Marrs, Jim. **Alien Agenda: The Untold Story of the Aliens Among Us**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-255838-6, xxx+434pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Pseudo-science text, first published in the USA, 1997; the author has previously written *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy*; so here he brings his journalistic skills to the subject of ufology, in a book which, according to the publishers, "goes deeper into the UFO phenomenon than ever before"; in other words, the usual nonsense, here dressed up perhaps a little more palatably than in books such as Courtney Brown's [see above].) *30th June 1997.*

Masterton, Graham. **The Chosen Child**. Heinemann, ISBN 0-434-00315-8, vi+424pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Horror novel, first edition; "Apart from his success in Britain and the US," states the back-flap blurb, "Graham Masterton has been Poland's bestselling author of supernatural thrillers since the collapse of communism"; this new novel is set in Poland.) *30th June 1997.*

Palmer, Stephen. **Glass**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-475-8, 341pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; Palmer's second novel, following his last year's debut, *Memory Seed*.) *5th June 1997.*

Powers, Tim. **Earthquake Weather**. Legend, ISBN 0-09-956011-9, 565pp, hardcover, cover

by Paul Campion, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it's set in a fantasticated contemporary California.) *3rd July 1997.*

Randles, Jenny. **Alien Contact: The First Fifty Years**. Collins & Brown, ISBN 1-85585-415-5, 144pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Illustrated 50th-anniversary history of ufology, first edition; yes, it all began in 1947, when an American pilot called Kenneth Arnold saw some "flying saucers"... ) *15th May 1997.*

Reichert, Mickey Zucker. **Prince of Demons: The Renshai Chronicles, Volume Two**. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-443-9, xii+622pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; "Mickey Zucker Reichert" is the form of her name used by American doctor and writer Miriam S. Zucker.) *June (?) 1997.*

Rucker, Rudy. **Infinity and the Mind: The Science and Philosophy of the Infinite**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-026295-4, x+342pp, B-format paperback, £8.99. (Popular science text, first published in the USA, 1982; it's sometimes easy for us to forget that the sf field's mad-cap Rudy Rucker, erstwhile drug-popping cyberpunk, is also the respectable Professor Rudolf von Bitter Rucker, great-great-grandson [or whatever] of the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, and author of highly-praised mathematical books such as this; recommended to those who want their brains stretched number-wise.) *29th May 1997.*

Sands, Marella. **Sky Knife**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-86126-5, 288pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Historical fantasy [?] novel, first edition; proof copy received; set in ancient Mexico, this is a debut novel by a new American writer who has an MA in anthropology.) *September 1997.*

Shatner, William. **Man o' War**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00454-7, 304pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this "Shatner" novel, set on Mars, has a new hero called Benton Hawkes; there's no firm clue as to who, if anyone, ghost-wrote the book, but judging from the tone it probably wasn't Ron Goulart.) *1st June 1997.*

Sheffield, Charles. **Putting Up Roots: A Jupiter Novel**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86241-5, 255pp, hardcover, cover by Vincent di Fate, \$21.95. (Young-adult sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is the third in a series of Heinlein-esque hard-sf "juveniles" which began with *Higher Education* [by Sheffield and Pournelle]; the second volume, which we didn't see, was called *The Billion Dollar Boy* [by Sheffield solus].) *September 1997.*

Simmons, Dan. **The Rise of Endymion**. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-10652-X, 579pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *Endymion* [1996] and the earlier "Hyperion Chronicles.") *11th August 1997.*

Stephenson-Payne, Phil, and Ian Covell. **A. E. van Vogt: Master of Null-A—A Working Bibliography**. "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume

47." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-45-9, viii+106pp, paperback, £5. (Sf author bibliography; it's in perfect-bound A5 format; a usefully detailed bibliography of a major [though rapidly fading] American sf writer; recommended.) *May 1997.*

Stine, R. L. **Goosebumps Collection 6: Why I'm Afraid of Bees, Deep Trouble, Go Eat Worms**. Scholastic/Hippo, ISBN 0-590-19255-8, 361pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Juvenile horror omnibus, first edition; the three constituent novels were originally published separately in the USA, 1994; all are copyright "Parachute Press, Inc.") *May 1997.*

Stine, R. L. **Night of the Living Dummy III**. "Goosebumps, 40." Scholastic/Hippo, ISBN 0-590-19254-X, 124pp, B-format paperback, £3.50. (Juvenile horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996; it's copyright "Parachute Press, Inc.") *May 1997.*

Stout, Amy. **The Royal Four**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-65363-9, 384pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997.) *19th June 1997.*

Volsky, Paula. **The White Tribunal**. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37846-5, 390pp trade paperback, \$13.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) *11th August 1997.*

Whyte, Jack. **The Eagles' Brood: The Camulod Chronicles**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-85289-4, 412pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Arthurian fantasy [?] novel, first edition; proof copy received; third in a trilogy which began with *The Skystone* and *The Singing Sword*, neither of which we saw; it's commended by people like Marion Zimmer Bradley, Tony Hillerman and Tom Shippey [the last-named states that this is "the Arthurian legend the way the noncoms saw it: tough and gritty and compelling"]; we're told nothing about the author here but, from other sources, he's probably Canadian, born 1940.) *September 1997.*

Williams, Michael. **Allamanda**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-68223-X, 436pp, hardcover, cover by Mick van Houten, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1997; it's a follow-up to the author's previous book, *Arcady*.) *5th June 1997.*

Wood, N. Lee. **Faraday's Orphans**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00446-6, 294pp, C-format paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, \$13. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1996; the publishers try to pass it off as a "first edition," but in fact Gollancz did a British edition last year; reviewed by Paul J. McAuley in *Interzone* 114; N. Lee Wood, an American living in Paris, is married to sf novelist Norman Spinrad, and her first novel, *Looking for the Mahdi*, was short-listed for this year's Arthur C. Clarke Award [and is rumoured to have come close to winning].) *1st June 1997.*

## Books Received from Borgo Press

Borgo kindly sent us a large boxful of review copies in one go, some of them over a year old. We thought it best to list them separately here. (DP)

Budrys, Algis. **Outposts: Literatures of Milieux**. "I. O. Evans Studies in the Philosophy and Criticism of Literature, No. 28." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-89370-447-4, 144pp, trade paperback, \$19. (Collection of general essays on sf, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it contains five reprinted pieces, with notes, glossary and index; some of Budrys's most famous essays are here, including the lengthy "Paradise Charted" and "Non-Literary Influences on SF"; recommended, although Budrys can be irritating at times, and even slapdash; a small example: he states that "Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* can be seen as the last ripple of the imaginary voyage tale"; how on Earth can a book which inspired countless imitations, and which appeared seven years before the almost-equally influential imaginary voyage *Gulliver's Travels*, be described as a "last ripple"? ) *Late entry: 1996 publication, received in May 1997.*

De Camp, L. Sprague. **Rubber Dinosaurs and Wooden Elephants: Essays on Literature, Film, and History**. "I. O. Evans Studies in the Philosophy and Criticism of Literature, No. 26." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-89370-454-7, 144pp, trade paperback, \$19. (Collection of general essays on sf, fantasy and related topics; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it contains 13 reprinted pieces, with notes and index; those favourite subjects of de Camp's, the writings of H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, loom large – but there's a fair variety of other material, mostly lightweight though erudite; a pleasant collection by the field's oldest still-active writer [born 1907, and hence a year senior to Jack Williamson].) *Late entry: 1996 publication, received in May 1997.*

Joshi, S. T. **A Subtler Magick: The Writings and Philosophy of H. P. Lovecraft**. 2nd edition. "The Milford Series: Popular Writers of Today, Volume 62." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-916732-59-4, 312pp, trade paperback, \$29. (Critical study of the great American horror writer; originally published in much shorter form as *Reader's Guide to H. P. Lovecraft* [Starmont House, 1983], it's "virtually a new work rather than merely a patched-up version of the original," according to the author – "aside from the initial chapter and a few small portions of others, this version has been written entirely afresh"; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; this makes a fine companion volume to Joshi's recent magisterial biography of Lovecraft [Necronomicon Press, 1996]; highly recommended – of all the Borgo Press books listed here, it's the biggest and certainly one of the best.) *Late entry: 1996 publication, received in May 1997.*

Reginald, Robert. **Xenograffiti: Essays on Fantastic Literature**. "I. O. Evans Studies in the Philosophy and Criticism of Literature, No. 33." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-8095-



1900-3, 224pp, trade paperback, \$23. (Collection of essays and reviews on sf and fantasy works, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; "Robert Reginald" [Michael Burgess] is the owner of Borgo Press, so it has to be suspected that this is a bit of a vanity project; most of the pieces are brief, and the author seems to be under a compulsion to collect together every last word he has published anywhere [including, for example, single-paragraph author obituaries from *Locus*]; nevertheless, there is much that is engaging and useful here, such as the piece on 19th-century parodies of Rider Haggard and the introductions to little-known fantasy works like Charlotte Haldane's *Melusine* and Sir Henry Newbolt's *Aladore*; recommended, with reservations.) *Late entry: 1996 publication, received in May 1997.*

Schweitzer, Darrell, ed. **Discovering Classic Fantasy Fiction: Essays on the Antecedents of Fantastic Literature.** "I. O. Evans Studies in the Philosophy and Criticism of Literature, No. 23." Borgo Press, ISBN 1-55742-087-4, 176pp, trade paperback, \$21. (Anthology of essays on fantasy writers; first edition; it contains 11 pieces – some reprint, some new – with notes, short bibliographies and index; contributors include Don D'Amassa, Don Herron, Ben P. Indick, S. T. Joshi, Neal Wilgus and others; most of the essays are solidly useful, though a few, such as Indick's gushing piece on A. Merritt, are disappointingly slight; recommended, overall.) *Late entry: 1996 publication, received in May 1997.*

Smith, Curtis C. **Welcome to the Revolution: The Literary Legacy of Mack Reynolds.** "The Milford Series: Popular Writers of Today, Volume 64." Borgo Press, ISBN 1-55742-236-2, 136pp, trade paperback, \$19. (Bio-critical study of the American sf writer Dallas McCord

Reynolds [1917-1983]; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; Reynolds was a most unusual case in U.S. sf in that he was, for most of his career, an avowed Marxist [despite which, he was a leading contributor to John W. Campbell's notoriously conservative *Analog* magazine – which goes to show, I suppose, that Campbell was so far to the right that he came out the other side]; this book is good on the bio-bibliographical details, but rather skimpy in its critical assessment of Reynolds's large output; Brian Stableford's long essay on Reynolds, included in *Outside the Human Aquarium* [see below], has a greater density of interesting comment.) *Late entry: 1995 publication, received in May 1997.*

Stableford, Brian. **Opening Minds: Essays on Fantastic Literature.** "I. O. Evans Studies in the Philosophy and Criticism of Literature, No. 14." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-89370-403-2, 144pp, trade paperback, \$19. (Collection of general essays on sf and fantasy, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it contains nine reprinted pieces, plus notes, bibliography and index; most of these are early essays, dating from the 1970s, which first appeared in *Foundation*, *Vector* and other journals; subjects covered include "SF and the Mythology of Progress," "Man-Made Catastrophes," "Marxism, SF and the Poverty of Prophecy" and "Future Wars"; recommended.) *Late entry: 1995 publication, received in May 1997.*

Stableford, Brian. **Outside the Human Aquarium: Masters of Science Fiction.** 2nd edition. "The Milford Series: Popular Writers of Today, Volume 32." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-89370-457-1, 152pp, trade paperback, \$19. (Collection of essays on sf and fantasy writers, originally published as *Masters of Science Fiction: Essays on Six Science Fiction Authors*, 1981; there is a simultaneous hard-

cover edition [not seen]; this expanded edition [about twice the size of the earlier book] contains ten reprinted pieces, plus notes, bibliography and index; four of the recent essays, on Philip K. Dick, David H. Keller, Theodore Sturgeon and Stanley G. Weinbaum, first appeared in *Interzone* [in our "Creators of SF" series]; the older pieces are from *Foundation*, *Vector* and other journals; recommended.) *Late entry: 1995 publication, received in May 1997.*

Westfahl, Gary. **Islands in the Sky: The Space Station Theme in Science Fiction Literature.** "I. O. Evans Studies in the Philosophy and Criticism of Literature, No. 15." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-89370-407-5, 224pp, trade paperback, \$23. (Critical study of the named theme/motif in sf; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; Westfahl is one of the liveliest and most readable [and sometimes the most pugnacious] of the newer American academic sf critics, with many interesting papers published in *Extrapolation*, *Foundation*, *S-F Studies*, etc; it's good to see a book by him at last [another volume, on "Hard SF," apparently has been released by Greenwood Press, but we haven't seen it yet]; recommended.) *Late entry: 1996 publication, received in May 1997.*

Wilgus, Neal. **Seven by Seven: Interviews with American Science Fiction Writers of the West and Southwest.** "The Milford Series: Popular Writers of Today, Volume 44." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-89370-273-0, 136pp, trade paperback, \$19. (Collection of interviews with sf and fantasy writers, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; most of these pieces first appeared in the now-defunct U.S. fanzine *Science Fiction Review*; the interviewees are Suzy McKee Charnas, Stephen R. Donaldson, Fred Saberhagen, Robert Shea, Jack Williamson,

Robert Anton Wilson and Roger Zelazny; there is an index, and a brief chronology for each author.) *Late entry: 1996 publication, received in May 1997.*

Wood, Martine. **The Work of Gary Brandner: An Annotated Bibliography & Guide.** "Bibliographies of Modern Authors, No. 23." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-8095-1519-9, 112pp, trade paperback, \$17. (Bibliography of the American horror novelist who wrote *The Howling* [1977]; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; Brandner seems a very minor figure from this side of the Atlantic, but no doubt he has a following in the States; as this bibliography shows, he has written thrillers, westerns, screenplays, popular non-fiction and so on, as well as the horror fiction for which he is best known.) *Late entry: 1995 publication, received in May 1997.*

Zebrowski, George. **Beneath the Red Star: Studies on International Science Fiction.** Edited by Pamela Sargent. "I. O. Evans Studies in the Philosophy and Criticism of Literature, No. 9." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-89370-450-4, 120pp, trade paperback, \$17. (Collection of reviews of foreign sf in English translation; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; this is a book on an important subject – authors covered include Stanislaw Lem and the Strugatsky Brothers, among many others – so it is a pity that the result is so flimsy: Zebrowski seems to have made no attempt to update or expand his original reviews from the 1970s and 1980s, most of which are very short [the book is set in large type]; there is a useful checklist of foreign sf in translation, 1970-1995 [the heyday was the late 1970s and early 1980s – sadly, very little has appeared in English since then]; recommended, so far as it goes, but it could have been a more significant work.) *Late entry: 1996 publication, received in May 1997.*

Anderson, Kevin J. **Ruins.** "The X-Files." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648253-8, 291pp, A-format paperback, cover by Cliff Nielson, £5.99. (Sf/horror TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; based on the characters created by writer-producer Chris Carter.) *12th June 1997.*

Bisson, Terry. **The Fifth Element.** "A Luc Besson film." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648346-1, 250pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf movie novelization, first published in the USA, 1997; based on the screenplay by Luc Besson and Robert Mark Kamen for the film starring Bruce Willis, Gary Oldman, etc; hmm ... Bisson rewrites Besson.) *12th June 1997.*

Friedman, Michael Jan. **Batman & Robin.** Warner, ISBN 0-7515-2001-2, 219pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy movie novelization, first published in the USA, 1997; based on the screenplay by Akiva Goldsman [where do these Hollywood screenwriters come from? – they're paid more money than almost any other kind of writer, and yet they almost always seem to be unknowns] for the "blockbuster movie" directed by Joel Schumacher and starring George Clooney as Batman and Arnold Schwarzenegger as Mr Freeze.) *3rd July 1997.*

## Spinoffery

*This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.*

Jordan, Robert. **Conan the Destroyer.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-970441-2, 271pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Tweddell, £4.99. (Fantasy movie novelization, first published in the USA, 1984; it's based on a screenplay by Stanley Mann, although that fact is mentioned nowhere – and nor is the name of the hero's original creator, Robert E. Howard; "Robert Jordan" is a pseudonym of James O. Rigney, Jr.) *5th June 1997.*

Macnee, Patrick, with Dave Rogers. **The Avengers and Me.** Titan, ISBN 1-85286-801-5, 144pp, very large-format paperback, £14.99. (Heavily illustrated reminiscences of the actor who played secret agent John Steed in the quasi-sf TV series *The Avengers*; first edition.) *22nd May 1997.*

Mortimore, Jim. **Space Truckers.** Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-2218-X, 239pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf movie novelization, first edition [?]; based on a screenplay by Ted Mann for the film starring Dennis Hopper and Charles Dance; it states "first published 1996" inside, but presumably it was delayed pending the film's release.) *23rd May 1997.*

Nye, Jody Lynn, with Anne McCaffrey. **The Dragonlover's Guide to Pern.** Illustrated by Tod Cameron Hamilton and James Clouse. 2nd edition. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-41274-5, xi+260pp, very large-format paperback, \$15. (Illustrated guide to McCaffrey's imaginary planet of Pern [where the dragons come from]; the first edition appeared in 1989; it's copyright Bill Fawcett and Associates.) *Late entry: 6th March publication, received in May 1997.*

Richards, Justin. **Dragon's Wrath.** "The New Adventures." Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20508-1, 247pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £4.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, featuring the spacefaring adventures of Bernice Summerfield [a former associate of Doctor Who's]; first edition.) *19th June 1997.*

Shapiro, Marc. **The Anderson Files: The Unauthorized Biography of Gillian Anderson.** Warner, ISBN 0-7515-2107-8, xii+226pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Biography of the actress who plays FBI agent Dana Scully in the sf/horror TV series *The X-Files*; first published in the USA, 1997; star biogs like this tend to be full of inconsequential nonsense [anything to attain the word-length!]; a small example: "She was barely old enough to read," claims the author, "when *Omni* magazine, in particular the section devoted to UFOs, began to top her reading list"; Anderson was born in August 1968, and *Omni* debuted in October 1978, by which time out little star-to-be would have been ten years and two months old; is Shapiro suggesting she was a late developer, reading-wise?; no, he's just filling space.) *5th June 1997.*



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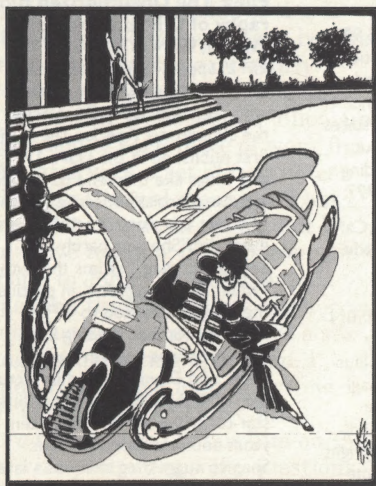
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## COMING NEXT MONTH

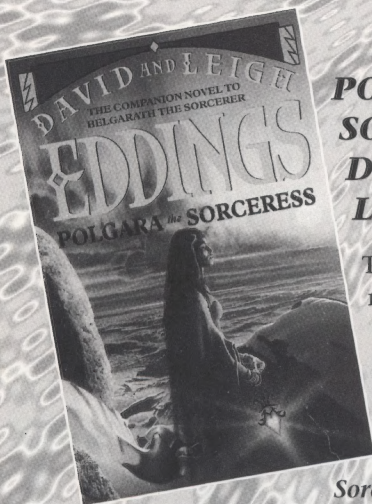
As well as the conclusion to Newman & Byrne's "Teddy Bears' Picnic" (their last USSA story for us!) we bring you a brilliantly original piece by Greg Egan – the modern sf field's leading novelist of ideas. Plus other stories and all our usual features and reviews. So look out for the September *Interzone*, number 123, on sale in August.



# This month's news

## *Voyager* no limits

<http://www.harpercollins.co.uk/voyager>



### **POLGARA THE SORCERESS** *David and Leigh Eddings*

The big news of the month has to be the publication of the long-awaited new novel from David and Leigh Eddings, *Polgara the*

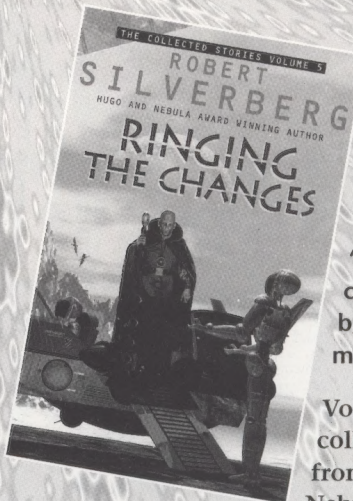
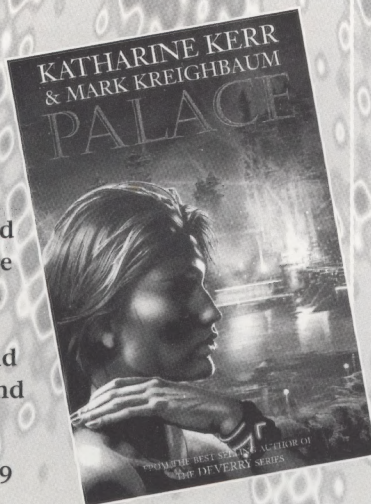
*Sorceress*. This is the companion novel to the hugely popular *Belgarath the Sorcerer*, and finally, the full story of the Belgariad is revealed — the story of wizardry and politics, doom and evil, love and magic.

Published 10 July £17.99

### **PALACE** *Katharine Kerr and Mark Kreighbaum*

A deadly assassin is hired to murder two seemingly unconnected humans in the Pleasure Sect; however, one has disappeared and the other's secret past could mean that she is beyond his reach...

Published 21 July £5.99



### **RINGING THE CHANGES** *Robert Silverberg*

'Silverberg seems capable of amazements beyond those of mere mortals' *Washington Post*

Volume 5 of the collected short stories from the Hugo and Nebula Award winning

author combines thrilling originality and masterful storytelling.

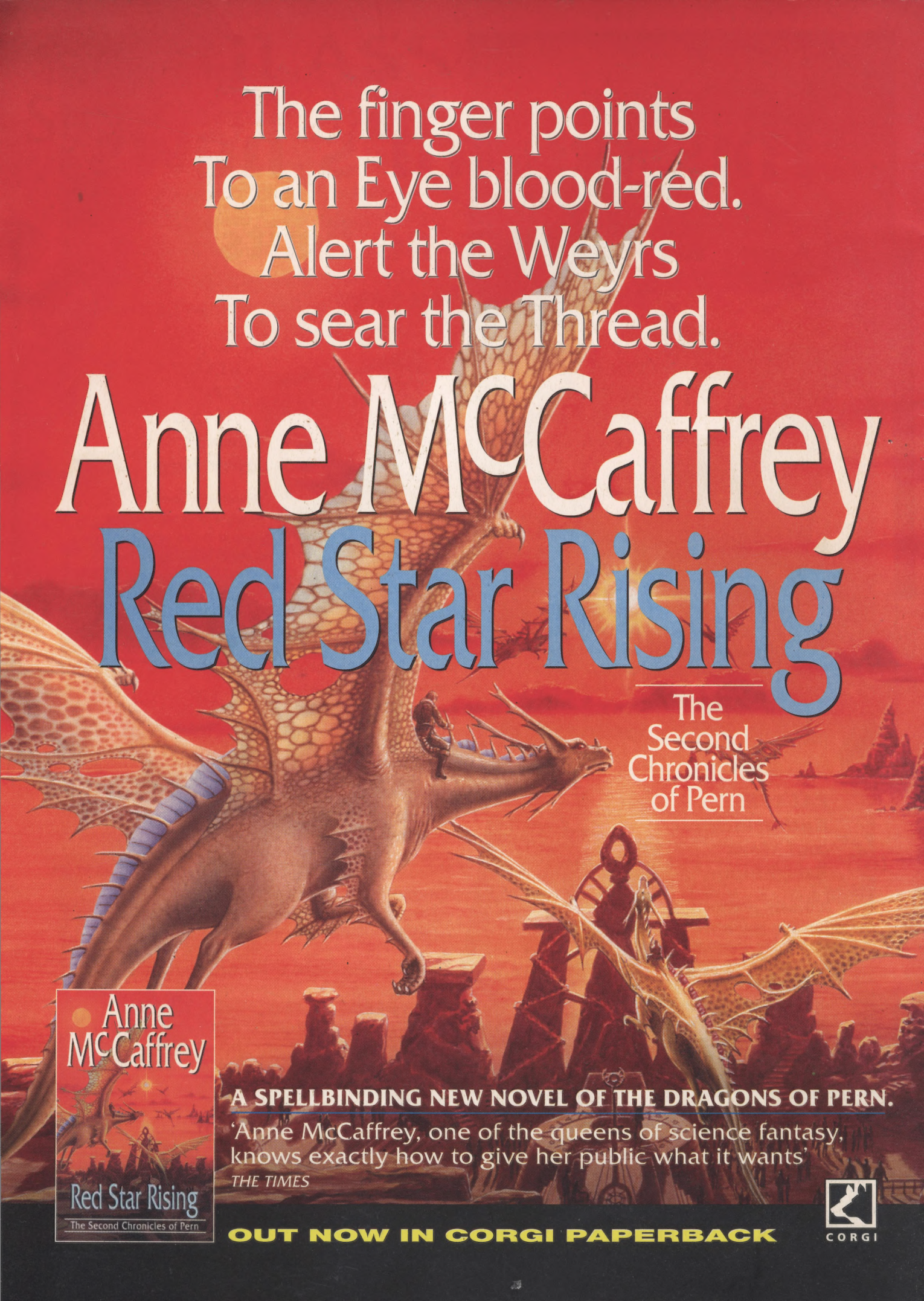
Published 21 July £6.99

Finally, it's never too early to put an important date in your diary. Steve Baxter, the award-winning author of *Voyage*, will be signing copies of his new book, *Titan*, at Andromeda Bookshop on Saturday 16th August from midday, so come along if you're in the area and keep an eye out for further author events in the near future.

Alternatively, log on to our website for more information, news, reviews, interviews and excerpts from up-coming Voyager titles at: <http://www.harpercollins.co.uk/voyager>

These and other titles can be ordered by telephone. Access or Visa card holders call: London 0181 307 4052 or Glasgow 0141 306 3349.





The finger points  
To an Eye blood-red.  
Alert the Weyrs  
To sear the Thread.

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